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JUNE 2011

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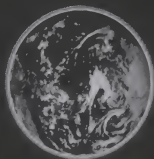
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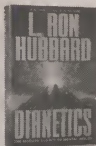
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## SCIENCE FICTION

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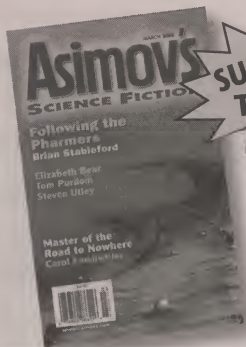
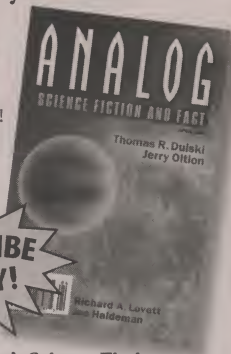
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## ENTER A FUTURE

With the release of its first digital anthology, *Enter a Future: Fantastic Tales from Asimov's Science Fiction*, this magazine has plunged head-first into the frothy waves of electronic publishing.

Digital editions of the magazine have been available for purchase since our January 2002 issue. Sales began small and grew slowly until the introduction of the Kindle, Amazon's electronic reader. The four Dell fiction magazines—*Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Alfred Hitchcock*, and *Ellery Queen*—were the eleventh through fifteenth magazines offered for sale from the Kindle Magazine Store. Readers could purchase individual issues or subscribe to the magazine for a monthly fee. It was exhilarating to watch *Asimov's* frenzied climb up through the ranks of best sellers. At one point, we were even in first place, ahead of *The New Yorker* and *Time Magazine* for a couple of hours.

Naturally, being a specialty magazine, our hold on the top didn't last forever. Amazon now sells subscriptions to seventy-six magazines, and we've stabilized at around the fifteenth place, but sales have continued to grow. Digital editions of *Asimov's* now account for about 25 percent of all our sales. We're available in more places, too. We can now be read on the Sony e-reader, Barnes & Noble's Nook, and Fictionwise, and we are continually reaching out to additional e-retailers.

Once it became clear that interest in digital subscriptions was not abating, I was asked to pull together stories for a digital anthology. There was one caveat, however. Providing the authors were interested, I could use any story I wanted as long as the material had appeared in *Asimov's* after our conversion to desktop publishing late in 1996. In theory, that

sounded fine. We've published close to a thousand stories in the past thirteen years. Unfortunately, that giant pool of tales didn't include the one story I had my heart set on—Robert Silverberg's Hugo-Award-winning "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another," which first appeared in our June 1989 issue.

This story had already gotten away from me once, when I couldn't find space for it in *Asimov's Science Fiction's Thirtieth Anniversary Anthology*. I had promised myself I'd run the tale the next time I put together a set of stories from *Asimov's*. I told Bob about this theoretical digital anthology over the course of the 2009 Nebulas Awards weekend in Los Angeles. He was intrigued by the book and let me know that the novelette had been created with the software available at the time. If I could clean it up, the story would be mine (well, it would be mine as long as I paid for it, too). Bob had used that software for quite some time and, fortunately, back in the nineties I'd created a macro for updating his reflections column. Although initially the formatting looked daunting, it took only eighteen minutes to clean it up and create a pristine manuscript. Bob was also kind enough to let me use the story's title as inspiration for the title of the new book.

Once I knew Bob was behind the book, it was easy to pull the rest of the collection together. Just as a typical issue of *Asimov's* is a mix of familiar faces and brand-new authors, I wanted *Enter a Future* to be a collection of established professionals and promising newcomers. I was concerned about what the authors might think of a book that existed only in digital format, but everyone I approached agreed to let their story appear in it.

Since an electronic anthology doesn't face the same constraints that a print

book does, I didn't have to make decisions based on the length of each tale. As a result, the anthology also consists of Hugo-Award-winning novellas by Connie Willis (the delightful "Inside Job") and Robert Reed (the stark tale of "A Billion Eves") as well as the deeply moving *Asimov's* Readers'-Award-winning novella by Kristine Kathryn Rusch's about "Recovering Apollo 8." Shorter pieces include Allen M. Steele's brilliant Hugo- and Nebula-Award finalist detailing the torturous "Days Between"; Nancy Kress's taut thriller "Safeguard"; long-time *Asimov's* favorite Mary Rosenblum's quietly told tale of a "Breeze from the Stars"; the story that helped land Gord Sellar on the 2009 John Campbell Award ballot for best new author, "Lester Young and the Jupiter's Moons' Blues"; new author Sara Genge's desperate short story about "Shoes to Run"; and Daryl Gregory, now no longer a new author, but fresh to *Asimov's* when his novelette was first published, with his own Readers'-Award-winning "Second Person, Present Tense."

*Enter a Future* is available exclusively on the Kindle. If sales are strong, and early indications imply that they are, we will almost certainly put more digital anthologies together. Our print magazine remains our primary focus, but we're very happy to see that digital editions are contributing to an increase in readership. We're fortunate that so many talented authors send us their terrific stories. Our stories deserve a broad audience, so to reach as many readers as possible, we will continue to explore the opportunities that exist on the digital frontier.

For an upcoming editorial on the electronic reading experience, I'd like to hear from readers who subscribe via the Nook, Kindle, or any other e-reader. I'm also interested in opinions from people who have downloaded individual issues. Responses to this query should be emailed to [asimovssf@dellmagazines.com](mailto:asimovssf@dellmagazines.com). Comments may be edited and shortened for publication. Let me know if I can use your name and be sure to put "Digital Subscriptions" in the subject line. ○

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## NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

I've been reading—not for the first time—Charles Mackay's lively book *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, which I've owned for many years and which I browse through every time some episode of financial madness goes whirling across the landscape. I remember studying it very closely in 1968, when we had a lively little stock-market bubble involving companies whose names ended in “-onics,” and again in the early 1980s when our banks were gleefully lending billions of dollars to unstable Latin American dictatorships, and later that decade when the savings-and-loan companies were running wild, and again in the late 1990s when the Internet-stock boom transfixed the world with dreams of instant billions. And, of course, I gave it another run-through over the past year or two after the implosion of the subprime-mortgage fantasia and the associated collapse of all credit-related dreams.

Mackay was a Scottish lawyer and journalist with a vigorous, pungent literary style, and his book, first published in 1841 and revised and expanded eleven years later, remains entertaining and exceedingly readable more than a century and a half later. It has never gone out of print, and is available today in a variety of editions, including a free Internet version. My copy of it is the thirteenth printing of a reprint that was issued in 1932, a year which, some of you may recall, saw the global economy in a very deep doldrum indeed after the speculative excesses of the go-go 1920s.

My 1932 edition carries a foreword by Bernard Baruch, a shrewd old financier now, alas, largely forgotten, who made millions (at a time when a million dollars was a serious amount of money) by betting against the instincts of the crowds. “All economic movements, by their nature,” Baruch writes, “are motivated by crowd

psychology,” and he goes on to quote the German poet Schiller to the effect that “anyone taken as an individual is tolerably sensible and reasonable—as a member of a crowd he at once becomes a blockhead.” And in the conclusion of his preface he notes, “I have always thought that if, in the lamentable era of the ‘New Economics,’ culminating in 1929, even in the very presence of dizzily spiraling stock prices, we had all continuously repeated, ‘two and two make four,’ much of the evil might have been avoided.”

Charles Mackay was born a century too soon to have written about the great stock-market crash of 1929, and two centuries too early to have known about the Internet mania of seventy years later, but he had no shortage of other material to discuss, as the 724-page bulk of his book demonstrates. In those 724 pages he covers many of the great herd-driven delusions of history: the Dutch tulip mania, the Crusades, the witch-hunts of the middle ages, the belief in ghosts, in alchemy, and in the healing powers of magnetism, and ever so much more. Of course he deals with financial fantasies, too—in particular the Mississippi Company scheme that nearly wrecked the French economy in 1720, and the South Sea Bubble that did the same for England at about the same time.

Perhaps I should remind you, first, of what went on during our own Internet bubble of about a decade ago, for, as both Charles Mackay and Bernard Baruch take pains to remind us, we forget nothing so quickly as the financial follies of the past, and thus are always ripe for repeating them. The Internet, of course, has completely transformed the world since it exploded into our midst in the 1990s. It is hard now for most of us to imagine life without e-mail, without Google, without amazon.com, without Wikipedia, without eBay, without the myriad apps of our



smartphones. As the new medium took form, a swarm of new companies sprang up to meet its needs, and some very clever entrepreneurs made a great many billions of dollars thereby. But not every Internet startup turned out as well as amazon.com or eBay, and more than a few billions of dollars were lost by ill-advised speculation in the companies that didn't make it.

There was Webvan, for instance. Order your groceries on line, have them conveniently delivered to your door. Ideal for those snowy days, right? It raised \$375 million from investors in 1999; before long its stock value was \$1.2 billion; it expanded from one city to eight, and was aiming for eighteen more when it discovered that there really wasn't much profit to be made in selling groceries that way. By July 2001 it was bankrupt, two thousand employees were out of work, and the investors had lost every dime.

Or Boo.com, an online fashion store whose site was terribly slow to load. In six months it went through \$188 million of its investors' money before going broke in May of 2000. Another casualty of that year was Kibu.com, an on-line community for teenage girls, that lasted just 46 days before it ran short of money. August 2001 saw the demise of Flooz.com, which was supposed to provide an alternative to credit cards. You bought on-line currency called "flooz"—the Internet has always been big on baby-talk terminology—and could spend it at various retail outlets. Nobody saw any point to the use of flooz, and the collapse of the company in 2001 took out \$35 million of stockholder money. Freeinternet.com, unsurprisingly, found that free Internet service did not generate much in the way of earnings, despite having 3.2 million users, and it, too, went broke. So did dozens of other companies, some of whose stockholders were briefly billionaires before their stock plunged to zero while they held on too long. A billion dollars is a terrible thing to waste.

When we turn to Mackay's account of the South Sea Bubble, a scheme that was

supposed to pay off the British national debt, expand British commerce with Latin America by exchanging British cotton and wool for South American silver and Mexican gold, pay huge dividends to stockholders, and otherwise enrich the nation, we see one of the earliest versions of a Ponzi scheme (and how much fun Mackay would have had with Ponzi himself, or his later incarnation, Bernard Madoff!) Through a cunning public-relations program, the directors of the South Sea Company kept stirring excitement in the stock of their corporation in the London press and selling more shares to an eager populace, using the proceeds to finance the projects in hand and as collateral for ever-growing bank loans. South Sea stock rose from 130 to 300, 340, 550, 890. Dukes and princes and cabinet ministers were known to be stockholders. People clamored to buy in. "During the progress of this famous bubble, England presented a singular spectacle," Mackay tells us. "The public mind was in a state of unwholesome fermentation. Men were no longer satisfied with the slow but sure profits of cautious industry. The hope of boundless wealth for the morrow made them heedless and extravagant for today."

The inevitable collapse came when the shrewdest investors, aware that the bubble could not be inflated indefinitely, began to sell their stock, and others, belatedly catching wise, took their profits also, and then their losses, as the stock dropped swiftly back to 135. Plainly some sort of stock manipulation had taken place, and angry bilked investors demanded and got a parliamentary investigation and vengeance upon the company directors who had brought the country to the brink of ruin.

"Nobody blamed the credulity and avarice of the people," Mackay writes, "the degrading lust of gain, which had swallowed up every nobler quality in the national character, or the infatuation which had made the multitude run their heads with such frantic eagerness into the net held out for them by scheming projectors. These things were never men-

tioned. The people were a simple, honest, hard-working people, ruined by a gang of robbers, who were to be hanged, drawn, and quartered without mercy."

Does any of this sound familiar? Does it remind anyone of the current populist anger that calls for Congress to punish the evil bankers and corporate executives who stole all our money in the 2008 economic crash? One member of Parliament suggested that the company directors be tied in sacks and thrown into the Thames to drown. Others urged remedies nearly as drastic, especially when it was revealed that criminal acts really had been involved in the speculative mania: false entries on the company books, the sale of fictitious stock, the gift of shares to influential politicians and even the king's two mistresses, and so on. Ultimately no one was thrown into the river, but the investigation did end in severe fines for the company directors and the destruction of some political careers.

Another consequence of the South Sea Company debacle was a parliamentary act dissolving nearly a hundred other shady corporations that had sprung up at the same time, mainly for the purpose of parting unwary investors from their money. Mackay gives us a long list of them. Some seem harmless enough, though unlikely to have produced huge profits:

*"40. For carrying on a woolen manufacture in the north of England."*

*"41. For importing walnut-trees from Virginia."*

*"81. For a sail and packing-cloth manufactory in Ireland."*

But how about these—?

*"76. For extracting silver from lead."*

*"36. For a wheel for perpetual motion."*

*"86. For the transmutation of quick-silver into a malleable fine metal."*

*And this one, my favorite of the whole lot:*

*"17. For carrying on an undertaking of great advantage; but nobody to know what it is."*

Beautiful. *Nobody to know what it is!* Would you invest in a mystery company like that? Would I? Oh, no, not you! Not I! But on a balmy spring day in 1720 a long line of Londoners signed up for stock, putting down deposits of two pounds apiece in the expectation of receiving dividends of one hundred pounds a year. Between nine in the morning and three in the afternoon a thousand shares were sold. The enterprising promoter had pocketed two thousand pounds—a fortune—in just six hours. He packed up and left for France that evening, and was never heard from again.

This seems not very different, I think, from the enthusiasm that briefly pushed the stock prices of Webvan, Boo.com, and Flooz.com to such lofty levels only about a decade ago in our own land, except that the founders of those companies actually thought they could be profitable. And very likely the next stock mania or the next Ponzi scheme is already taking form in the mind of some cunning sharpie. It does seem to keep on happening, despite the evidence of past ruinations. One can only fall back upon clichés when we consider mankind's history of falling for such things over and over again:

*The more things change, the more they remain the same,* is the way the French journalist Alphonse Karr said it in 1849. Or, as an earlier observer of human folly, the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, put it several thousand years before that:

*There is no new thing under the sun. ○*

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## FANTASTIC

*fans*

When I was starting out as a writer, I never expected to have fans. Sure, I wanted to sell my stuff to *Asimov's* and *Analog* and *F&SF* someday. I wanted to publish novels and collections. But having fans, not so much. This was a curious lack of imagination on my part, because as a wannabe I was certainly a fan. I remember how awed I was when I first started going to cons and breathing the very same air as writers who had knocked my socks clean into the year 2284. Alas, I never met **Theodore Sturgeon** <[physics.emory.edu/~weeks/sturgeon](mailto:physics.emory.edu/~weeks/sturgeon)> or **Philip K. Dick** <[philipk.dick.com](mailto:philipk.dick.com)> or **Cordwainer Smith** <[cordwainer-smith.com](mailto:cordwainer-smith.com)> or **Robert Heinlein** <[heinleinsociety.org](http://heinleinsociety.org)>, although I did manage to clap eyes on some of them across crowded hotel lobbies.

But I *have* met some of the giants and I confess to having been reduced to a blithering fanboy when I first met **Mr. Silverberg** <[majipoor.com](mailto:majipoor.com)> and **Ms. LeGuin** <[ursulakleguin.com](mailto:ursulakleguin.com)> and **Mr. Malzberg** <[isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?Barry\\_N\\_Malzberg](mailto:isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?Barry_N_Malzberg)> and **Ms. Wilhelm** <[katewilhelm.com](mailto:katewilhelm.com)>. I know the feeling of having my tongue cleave to the top of my mouth after stammering, "*The Left Hand of Darkness* changed the way I write," or "I think *Dying Inside* is a masterpiece." Because compliments like that, even though heartfelt, are conversation stoppers. How can a writer possibly reply? These days I am myself sometimes crogged when fans—lovely, tongue-tied folks—come up to me and say that this story was the best thing I have ever written or that one helped lift them

through a bad patch. Where am I supposed to go with that?

But I've gotten used to having fans—very much like having them, in fact. It's fanfic that I'm still puzzling over.

*fic*

Fanfics, don't you know, are stories written by fans in the worlds of their favorite TV series or movies or books. Although fanfic would seem to be a recent phenomenon, it is as old as fiction itself. Readers—or listeners, before stories were written—have been retelling tales since forever, often in the process "improving" them. Plots get revised, characters redeemed, settings remodeled. Sherlock Holmes in twenty-first century London? **Done!** <[pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/sherlock/series1.html](http://pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/sherlock/series1.html)> Frankenstein meets Mary Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*? **Nebula award!** <[www4.ncsu.edu/~tenshi/documents/Kessel-PrideAndPrometheus.pdf](http://www4.ncsu.edu/~tenshi/documents/Kessel-PrideAndPrometheus.pdf)> **Shakespeare** <[Shakespeare-online.com](http://Shakespeare-online.com)> wrote fanfic of **Plutarch** <[livius.org/pi/pm/plutarch/plutarch.htm](http://livius.org/pi/pm/plutarch/plutarch.htm)>. **Milton** <[luminarium.org/sevenlit/milton](http://luminarium.org/sevenlit/milton)> wrote Bible fanfic. Okay, so I'm being polemical here, but bear with me. In a 2009 **io9** interview <[io9.com/5406069](http://io9.com/5406069)> fanfic fan **Michael Chabon** <[michaelchabon.com](http://michaelchabon.com)> explains that fanfic is "... not simple (or even complex) imitation; it's elaboration, infilling, transformation, a strategic redeployment of the tropes and figures of the source material/primary text."

When artists borrow from other artists, we nod knowingly and call it influence. But when ordinary folks appropriate creative work for their particular

use, those invested in the delivery of popular culture get defensive. They demean those who participate as inept, immature, unimaginative, and just a little out of control. This was especially true at the dawn of a fanfic revolution in the 1960s, when mass media began to present us with a variety of amazing source materials and improvements in mass communications made it possible for fans to spread their words far and wide. And in the beginning there were no fans more passionate than Trekkers. They had been promised a five year mission, but NBC gave them only three. The universe of **Star Trek** <[startrek.com](http://startrek.com)> practically begged for further exploration, so fans got busy. But some of the adventures that began to appear in smeary mimeographed 'zines did not always stick to the Star Trek bible; fans from different subcultures explored strange new worlds that gave Gene Roddenberry fits. Perhaps the most notorious fanfic was **Kirk/Spock** <[beyonddreamspress.com/history.htm](http://beyonddreamspress.com/history.htm)>, aka K/S, which gave rise to **Slash** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slash\\_fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slash_fiction)>. Slash fiction depicts fictional characters of the same sex in romantic or sexual situations. While all fanfic was not then nor is now slash, gender politics have made this a hot button topic, since it gives ammunition to those who would criticize all fanfic for twisting or even undermining the intentions of the original creators.

But so what? Just how far do the rights of the original creators extend? And who will speak for them? The writers who scripted the series? The actors who delivered the lines? More likely it is the corporations that have earned huge profits from the properties. Because make no mistake, while there is surely fanfic of all stripes based on the works of **J.K. Rowling** <[jkrowling.com](http://jkrowling.com)> and **Neil Gaiman** <[neilgaiman.com](http://neilgaiman.com)> and **Rick Riordan** <[rickriordan.com](http://rickriordan.com)>, most fanfic is media related. Certainly there are serious legal issues swirling around fanfic. Some of it can be considered parody, but which? What is fair use? And

since fanfic writers traditionally give their work away, what harm is actually being done? There are those who would answer it makes no difference that fanfic is free; it's a violation of copyright law. Yes, but **Fanfiction.net** <[fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net)> is huge and it is but one of a number of fanfic sites. Who is going to chase down every fanfic writer in the world? What good would sanctions do? For more on these matters, check out the excellent discussion at the **Chilling Effects Clearinghouse** <[chillingeffects.org/fanfic](http://chillingeffects.org/fanfic)>.

### writers

Although I suppose I have a stake in the legal debate over fanfic, it doesn't much interest me. What does get my attention is the prejudice against fanfic, especially when I detect small-mindedness in my own artistic sensibility. Who am I to look down my nose at these writers when I published a fanfic novel back in the day?

Anyone trying to understand fanfic and the reasons why it is so popular needs to consult the work of **Henry Jenkins** <[henryjenkins.org](http://henryjenkins.org)>, who calls his blog "Confessions of an Aca-Fan." Henry has taken it as his "personal challenge to find a way to break cultural theory out of the academic bookstore ghetto and open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer's point of view." He has thought deeply about fanfic and his eye-opening 1988 essay **Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten** <[web.mit.edu/course/21/21L.432/www/readings/star%20trek%20Rerun.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/course/21/21L.432/www/readings/star%20trek%20Rerun.pdf)> is must reading. Consider:

"Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups (women, the young, gays, etc.) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; it is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests." Later he makes the point that fan writers and readers are almost all female: "For some women, trapped within low paying jobs or within the socially isolated sphere of homemaker, participation

within a national, or international, network of fans grants a degree of dignity and respect otherwise lacking. For others, fandom offers a training ground for the development of professional skills and an outlet for creative impulses constrained by their workday lives." And the attitudes of fanfic writers to their source materials foreshadow attitudes of the Google Generation: "... fan writers suggest the need to redefine the politics of reading, to view textual property not as the exclusive domain of textual producers but as open to repossession by textual consumers."

### *fanfic to pro*

I asked my friend **Sandra McDonald** <[homepage.mac.com/samcdonald](http://homepage.mac.com/samcdonald)> to give me a quick tour of fanfic. Sandra is a well-established author; her *Outback Stars* trilogy was published by Tor and "The Monsters of Morgan Island" appeared in these pages in June of 2009. Her most recent book is a short story collection, *Diana Comet and Other Improbable Stories*. Like several other pros, **Naomi Novick** <[temeraire.org](http://temeraire.org)> and **Mercedes Lackey** <[mercedeslackey.com](http://mercedeslackey.com)>, for example, she has written fanfic under a pseudonym.

That her fanfic production has dropped as her career as a published writer has progressed is not surprising. "I had written a novel but I was also writing fan fiction. You get an enormous amount of feedback and enthusiasm. For me it was a hobby that turned out to be really beneficial because people were helping me get better." I wondered if most fanfic writers don't aspire to be published. "Fan fiction is about sharing your love of something. It's a hobby, a way to get your squee on. It has a built in community of readers who love the characters as much as you do. Some fan fiction writers want to be published novelists or short story writers. Some don't. They'll write a hundred thousand word story—but not for money. They don't want a book. They do it because they

love the characters and they want to share them with other people who love the characters. It's a mistake to think that fanfic writers want to write 'real' fiction. Many of them are happy to never ever deal with editors, agents, publishers. That's not their goal."

What's going on in fanfic today? "You have all these subgenres. You have domestic stories where your favorite characters settle down in suburbia. You have the male pregnancy stories, which some people get skeezy about. But what is important to many women? Pregnancies, babies, kids. They write stories about characters living happily ever after. They write pornography because there isn't a lot of women's pornography on the shelves of B&N. I think fan fiction is under appreciated because it's mostly written by women for women about women's concerns. And we know that women's writing in general is the subject of derision."

So is there fanfic based on her work? "I don't know of any," she says. "I would be really excited if someone did write some, but I wouldn't read it. I want to keep a barrier between how I think of the characters and how other people interpret them." She tells potential fans, "Have fun, do whatever you want, slash 'em, burn 'em, whatever you want. I'll just stay over here in my corner."

### *exit*

Alas, Sandra, there is no fanfic based on my stuff either—as far as I know. So it's easy for me to pontificate about how tolerant I would be if there were. I've come a long way in my attitude toward fanfic, but I don't know what I'd make of a story that really took my work to extremes. I probably wouldn't read it, although I'd be sorely tempted to peek. But since lots of my work is available under a **Creative Commons license** <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0>>, any fan with the will can have her way with my stories.

So go ahead. Feel free to put me to the test! ○

# THE COLD STEP BEYOND

Ian R. MacLeod

Subterranean Press recently published Ian R. MacLeod's new short story collection *Journeys*. His latest novel *Wake Up and Dream*—which is a successor, but in no way a sequel to his Clarke- and Campbell-award winning *Song of Time*—will be out soon from PS Publishing. Of his new story the author says, "I'd long had the idea of someone like Warrior Bess, but I had to try her out in several different locations before I hit on the right one—which turned out to be the universe of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds that also features in my Asimov's Reader's Award winning novella 'Breathmoss' (May 2002)." Ian maintains a website at [www.ianrmacleod.com](http://www.ianrmacleod.com).

In a clearing in an unnamed forest in a remote part of the great Island City of Ghezirah, there moved a figure. Sometimes, it moved silently as it swirled a sword in flashing arcs. Sometimes, it made terrible cries. It was high noon in midsummer, and the trees and the greensward shimmered. The figure shimmered as well; it was hard to get a proper sense of the method of its motion. Sometimes, it was here. Sometimes, there. It seemed to skip beyond the places that lay between. Then, when the figure finally stopped moving and let the sword fall to its side and hung its head, it became clear that it was scarcely human, and that it was tired and hot.

Bess of the Warrior Church sunk to a squat. The plates of her body armor—mottled greenish to blend with the landscape—were ribboned with sweat. Her limbs ached. Her head throbbed in its enclosing weight of chitin and metal. She swept her gaze around the encircling sweep of forest, willing something to come. She had been here many weeks now; long enough for grass to have grown back in the seared space beneath the caleche that had brought her here, and for its landing gear and rusty undersides to become hazed in bloodflowers.

She looked up across Ghezirah, arching away from her under Sabil's mirrored glare. There, off to the east and rising into the distance, hung the placid browns of the farm islands of Windfell. The other way flashed the greyblue seawall of the Floating Ocean. Somewhat closer, looming smudgy and indistinct over the forest, lay the fabled Isle of the Dead. But she knew she had no calling in any of those places. The intelligences of her church had directed her to this clearing. Yet until her foe arrived in whatever shape or form it might take, until the killing moment came, all she could do was practice. And wait.

Yet something told her that, today, she was no longer alone. Her fingers retensed



upon the hilt of her sword. She opened her mind and let her senses flow. Something was moving, small and quick, at the shadow edge of the forest. The movement was furtive, yet predatory. If Bess had still possessed hairs along the back of her spine, they would have crawled. She would also have shivered, had she not learned in her novitiate that tension is part of the energy of killing, and thus must be entirely re-absorbed.

Slowly, and seemingly more wearily than ever, Bess hauled her torso upright in a gleam of sweating plates. She even allowed herself to sway slightly. The weariness was genuine, and thus not difficult to fake. By then she was certain that she was being watched from the edge of the forest.

The blade of her sword seemed to flash in the hairsbreadth of an instant before movement itself. It flashed again. Bess seemed to slide across the placid meadow in cubes and sideways protrusions. She was there. Then she wasn't. She was under the trees perhaps a full half second after she had first levered herself up from a squat. Three severed leaves were floating down in the wake of her sword's last arc, and the thing crouched before her was small and bipedal. It also looked to be young, and seemed most likely human, and probably female, although its sole piece of clothing was a dirty swatch wrapped around its hips. Not exactly the sort of foe Bess had been expecting to end her vigil; just some feral forest-rat. But it hadn't scurried off into the green dark at her arrival even now that the three leaves had settled to the ground. It was holding out, in something that resembled a threatening gesture, a small but antique lightgun. The gun was live. Bess could hear the battery's faint hum.

"If you try to shoot that thing . . ." She said, putting all the power of command into her voice. "... you will die." The sound boomed out.

"And if I don't?" The little creature had flinched, but it was still wafting that lightgun. "I'll probably die anyway, won't I? You're a warrior—killing's all you're good for."

Bess's expression, or the little of it which was discernable within her face's plated mask, flickered. Since first leaving the iron walls of her church and setting out across Ghezirah in her caleche three moulds ago, she had discovered that warriors were most often thought of by those who lived outside her calling as little more than heedless bringers of death. Scarcely better, in essence, than the monstrous things they were trained to kill. Not to mention the stories that had passed in her wake of soured milk, broken mirrors, and malformed births. Or the taunts, and the curses, and the things thrown . . .

"I'll put this gun down if you put down your sword," the little creature said. "You're quick—I've seen that. But I don't think you're quicker than light itself . . ."

Technically, of course, the runt was right—but was it worth explaining that the killing movement of any weapon was the last part of a process that could be detected long before it began by those trained in the art of death? Bess decided that it was not. It was apparent from the thing's stance that it was used to using this lightgun, but also that it had no intention of doing so within the next few moments.

Bess lowered her sword to her side.

The creature did the same with the lightgun.

"What's your name?" Bess asked.

"Why should I tell you that? And who are you?"

"Because . . ." If there were any particular reasons, she couldn't immediately think of them. "My name is Bess."

The creature smirked. "Shouldn't you be called something more terrible than that? But I'll call you Bess if you want . . ."

"Do you have a name?"

"I'm Elli." The smirk faded. "I think I am anyway."

"You only *think*? Don't you know who you are?"



"Well, I'm *me*, aren't I?" The creature—although Bess now felt that she could safely assume that she was merely female and human, and not some monstrous anomaly or djinn—glanced down at her grubby, near-naked self. "Names are just things other people give you, aren't they? Or just plain make up . . . ?"

The helm of Bess's head, which had now absorbed the forest's shades, gave a ponderous nod. She understood the Elli-thing's remark, for she, too, had no proper idea of how she had got her name.

"Been watching you . . ." Elli nodded across the clearing. "Dead clever, the way you flicker in and out as if you're there and then not there."

"So why in the name of all the intelligences didn't you back off when I approached?"

Elli shrugged. "I could tell you were just practicing. That you didn't mean it . . ."

*Not meaning it* being about the worst insult that, in all Bess's long years of training within the walls of her church, had ever been flung her way.

"But it was still very impressive," Elli added. "If you could show me some more, I'd really like to watch."

*The Dead Queen's Gambit. The Circle Unleashed. The Upwards Waterfall. The Welcoming Blade. The Twice-Backwards Turn. The Belly Becomes the Mouth. The Leap of Steel. Even The Cold Step Beyond*, a maneuver of sword and space that Bess still found difficult to execute. She performed them all.

Before, she had felt tired and bored. But now that she had an audience, even one as lowly as this Elli-thing, she felt re-energized. Her blade sliced though the warm air and the fabric of local spacetime, drawing her sideways and backwards in intricate twists and turns. She remembered her dizzy exhilaration when she first managed this near-impossible trick in the practice yards. This was like that, but better.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Elli was clapping.

For want of anything else, and no longer feeling in the least goaded or stupid, Bess gave her sword a final flourish and made as much of a bow as her armored midriff would permit.

It was late afternoon. The shade beneath the trees was spreading. As Bess straightened, she saw that the Elli-thing had already vanished into the wood-scented dark.

Bess felt different that night as she squatted inside the iron womb of her caleche. Laid before her at the central altar of the cabin's console, set around with the glow of the more ordinary controls, was the steel eye of the keyhole that admitted the will of her church's intelligences. Briefly, it had flashed the message that had borne her here, and all the time since it had remained blank and blind. The other instructions since her changing into warrior form and setting out on her first quest had been plain—at least in their seeming purpose, if not in their execution and result . . .

That great seabeast which had supposedly been terrorizing a community of fisherwomen who lived in a desolate village on the far side of the Floating Ocean. A task that had seemed worthy of her first killing until she had faced the creature itself. A slobbering thing, true. Big and grey and, at least in appearance, monstrous. But it had been old and in pain and helpless. She had realized as it sobbed and moaned on that rocky shore and she drove her sword into its quivering flesh that she had been summoned to do this work not because the women of the village feared to kill the creature, but because they pitied it too much.

Then had come her duties in guarding a senior imam of the Church of the Arachnids, who was supposedly under threat from the incursion of an assassin djinn from other unspecified dimensions. But her arrival and attendance upon this plump and near-regal personage had coincided with a summit meeting of all the churches of the

animalcules in Eburnea regarding various issues of precedence and money. It soon became clear to Bess that her presence at the canny witch's brocaded shoulder through those interminable meetings in vast halls was intended not as protection, but as an implied threat of force.

And so it had gone, and then her third instruction had come, and now she was set down here amid this nowhere forest, waiting to do battle with an unexplained *something*. Bess shuffled down into her night couch. There was little space inside this vessel for much else—after all, what else did a warrior need other than her will and her sword?—but she had been permitted to bring one small chest containing her personal belongings, although she would just as happily have gone without it. The lid gave a pleading scream as she lifted it. This, she thought, as she gazed inside in the caleche's dull glow and breathed a stale waft of air, reminds me why I don't bother to look.

Other new novitiates were brought to the great walls of the Warrior Church by a variety of means and accidents. Lesser daughters. Unwanted or unexpected products of the vats. Those cursed with malformations, either of the body or the mind, which other and more squeamish churches found themselves unable to accept. Girls who had performed some sacrilege or debasement that placed them *beyond the pale*, in the antique phase. Downright criminals. They were all admitted in an unholy gaggle through the iron gates of the Warrior Church, although almost as many were soon found to be lacking and cast back out.

Bess remembered the rusty towers, and the courtyards of trial and test and battle. She remembered the light from classroom windows that washed through drapes of platinum gauze as they were schooled in all the near-endless varieties of monstrosity: djinn, interjection, tulpa, dragon, quasi-dragon, behemoth, and demon that they would be expected to destroy. Most of all, though, she remembered the faces of her fellow novitiates, and night-silence in the dormitories, and the laughter that exploded as soon as the junior imams doused the lights.

Clubfoot Nika. Humble Talla of the auburn tresses. And Afya of the shadows. All now transformed into hulking warriors like her. Out fighting some terror in the great island city of Ghezirah or across one or the other of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds. Or already dead. Bess gazed down at the few dry leavings of her past. A shriveled starflower. A tress of auburn hair. A hand-written note about soon returning, casually left.

Just one other item lay in there. Bess's taloned fingers struggled to pinch the fine loop of chain.

*Who are you, Bess . . . ?*

*Where do you come from . . . ?*

*What are you doing here . . . ?*

Bess no-name—Bess who had struggled to belong even in those dormitories of the dispossessed and deformed. From all the other novitiates, sitting along the dark lines of bunks, hands clasped around knees with eyes rapt and mouths agape, there was always some story to be heard. High schemes or low robberies. A birthmother knifed by a jealous bond mother. A hand let go in a market of slaves. Over the nights, the whispers echoed through the dormitory as the tales flowed on. And grew more elaborate, Bess began to notice, as well. So the suckling child came to remember the taste of her dying birthmother's blood, and the slave-sold underling survived a jumpship's spectacular crash. But the essential seed of truth of some lost life remained, and could thus be embroidered upon much as a basic sword thrust can once—but only once—it is entirely mastered.

But Bess was mute when the eyes turned to her . . .

*What about you, Bess?*

*What do you remember about the time before you were chosen?*

She couldn't answer such questions. She was Bess simply because that was what some lesser manifestation of the church's intelligences had deigned to call her. All there was was this great iron-enclosed edifice, and her friends, and dormitory nights such as these, and all the days of learning and practice. Nothing else. She had no sense of who or what she had been before. She might as well have come from nowhere, just as the chants and the jibes insisted. But for this one object . . .

It was called a locket. Or so she supposed; the terminology for items of jewelry was not a form of knowledge in which warriors were expected to be versed. But the word seemed to come with possession of the item. Which might mean something. Or might not.

She had rarely worn the thing, even when her head and neck would have allowed such a vanity before she changed into full warrior form. But she had kept it. The chain was as finely made as were the great chains which anchored the islands against the spin of Ghezirah's vast sphere. From it, flashing bright then dull in the glow globe's light, depended the silver teardrop which was the locket itself, engraved with dizzying fractal patterns and swirls.

Bess felt that she was being drawn into the pattern, and permitted herself the wasted energy of a small shudder as her armored fingers unslipped the chain and re-closed her chest. Then she stretched down to rest.

She was already awake when the caleche's interior brightened to signal the onset of dawn. A fizzing buzz, a sense of some invisible liquid cleansing her scales, and she was ready for yet another day of waiting. She raised the hatch and reached for her sword. Outside, as the dawn-singers called in the light from their mirrored minarets, her footsteps left a dark trail like the last of the night. When she drew her sword and made her first leap, the trail vanished into misty air.

She was just re-practicing *The Circle Unleashed* in its rarely attempted more elaborate form when she knew that once again she was being watched. She hadn't considered how well this particular sword-stroke was fitted to the brief and spectacular series of leaps across the bloodflower-strewn meadow that she then executed. But it was.

There was the Elli-thing, standing undaunted but admiring at the edge of the forest, where today Bess's arrival had stirred or severed not one single leaf.

"Salaam," Bess said, a little breathlessly.

"*Sabah al Noor*, Bess of the Warrior Church." Elli replied with surprising formality, and Bess wondered as the creature then made a small bow at her own flush of pleasure to be greeted thus. Then a thought struck her.

"You haven't been out here all night, have you?"

"Oh no." Elli gave a quick shake of her head.

"Then where do you live?"

"Oh . . ." A quick shrug. A backwards point with a grubby thumb. ". . . just back there awhile. Would you like to come and look?"

A small, pale figure. A larger shape that was scarcely there at all. They both moved ever deeper into the nameless forest through dark avenues and spills of birdsong. This more resembled, Bess supposed, the kind of adventure that was sometimes associated in the popular mind with members of her church. Dragons to be slain. Monstrous shifts and anomalies in the fabric of spacetime to be annulled. Maidens, even, to be rescued. Bess should, she supposed, feel a deep unease to be deserting the precise spot where her church's intelligences had instructed her to stay. But warriors had to show bravery and initiative, didn't they? And how long could any human being, no matter how extensively changed and trained, be expected to wait?

They paused to take refreshment beside a tree hung with a kind of red fruit that Elli said was called pomegranate, and had existed as far back as the Gardens of Eden on the legendary first planet of Urrearth. They were also to be found, she added matter of factly, in Paradise itself. They were best cut apart with a sharp utensil. The trouble being with this thing—she patted the lightgun she had tucked into the tie around her waist, then glanced at Bess expectantly—is that it cooks them as well.

Bess studied the fruit, an odd-looking thing with a crown-like eruption at one end, which Elli was holding out. Her hand went to the hilt of her sword, although she knew what the imams of the Warrior Church would have said about using her sacred blade for such a menial task. If they had happened to be here and watching her, that was.

"Tell you what, Bess—I could throw it up like this."

Quicker than an instant, Bess drew her blade, and, in executing the *Spatchcock Goose*, vanished and reappeared as the pomegranate, now separated into two halves, still span up.

"Wooh!"

Elli caught one half as it descended. Bess, the other.

"So . . . ? What do you think of pomegranate? Not bad, is it, if you can deal with the seeds."

Bess had to agree. All in all, pomegranates were delicious. But, at least when it came to eating, they were a frustrating fruit. Her huge hands soon grew sticky, and so did her plated face. It was just as enjoyable, they decided, simply to toss the things up for the joy of slicing them in half. Pith and fruit were soon flying, and Bess's armor acquired the mottled reds, whites and pinks of pomegranate flesh.

"So . . . ?" Elli asked eventually, after Bess had demonstrated so many ways of slicing the fruit that much of what was left lying around them seemed to exist in some sideways dimension. Or, perhaps, was just a sticky mess. "This is what you do, is it? Cut things up in odd and interesting ways?"

Bess had been laughing too much to take offense. But she now explained how the origins of her church could be traced back to the time of the first jumpships, when gateways had been discovered where all time, space, and matter turned back in a cosmic rent. It had been a great breakthrough for womankind and every other sentient species, but it had also brought an end to the simplicity of one reality and the linear progression of time. Now, other forms of existence that had previously been thought of as nothing but useful constructs in understanding the higher dimensions of physics rubbed close against our own. The true aliens, the real horrors and monstrosities, lay not in the far-flung reaches of the galaxy, but sideways. And each passage of a jumpship disturbed enough of the fabric of this reality to allow, like a breath of dark smoke from a crack beneath a door, a little more of the seepage of these other realities in. Sometimes, they were comical or harmless. Often, they weren't noticeable at all. But sometimes they were the stuff of abject nightmare. Only through the use of creatures who were themselves close to nightmare could these monstrous interjections be fought.

Bess wiped her sword on a patch of grass and made to re-sheath it in her scabbard. But then Elli had laid her hand on a part of her forearm that still retained some sensitivity. It felt sticky and warm.

"That sword of yours—I suppose it does something similar? The way it seems to cut through the world."

"Well . . . You *could* say that, I suppose. Although the principle is much more controlled."

"Can I have a go?"

The request was ridiculous. It was sacrilege. So why hadn't she yet sheathed her sword?

"You can try this, Bess." Elli held out her cheap lightgun. "It's quite deadly."

"No," Bess rumbled.

"Well, perhaps you could at least let me give the handle-thing a quick hold."

"It's called the hilt." Bess watched in something like horror or amazement as her own hand took the flat of the blade and held it out.

"Hilt, then."

Elli's fingers were so small they barely circled the banded metal. Yet Bess felt a small shiver—something akin to the sensation that she had experienced last night when she studied that locket—run through her. The sword shivered, too. Sensing a new presence, it had responded with blurring hint of the final darkness beyond all dark that was woven into the exquisite metal.

Elli's fingers retracted. She let out a shuddering breath. "It feels like . . . Everything and nothing at all."

It was getting colder and dimmer now when, by rights, even in a place as over-shadowed as this forest had become, it should have been growing warmer and brighter. The trees were giant things, spewing mossy boughs over which they had to clamber.

Elli was quick and sure and sharp as she scampered over the deadfalls. Bess, meanwhile, felt clumsy and lost. Vulnerable, as well. She stole glances at this odd little creature. What exactly *was* she? And how did she survive in this confusing jungle? A giant beetle, a crimson thing more jagged and threatening than her own helmeted head, regarded Bess with its many eyes before raising some kind of stinging tail and finally, reluctantly, backing off. There were probably more fearsome things than that out here in this forest—perhaps even monstrosities fierce enough to merit the attentions of a member of the Warrior Church. What defense could this near-naked young thing with only a cheap toy of a lightgun possibly put up? Unless she was far more dangerous than she seemed . . .

The thought that all of this could be some kind of deathly trap niggled in Bess's mind. But, at the same time, it was good to explore and make new friends, and her caleche with all its duties lay only a few miles off, and she was enjoying herself too much to want to stop.

The forest's branches were now so criss-crossed as to give no sense of light or sky. It was more like a vast and twisty ceiling from which drapes of a livid moss provided the only illumination.

Then Elli stopped.

"Where are we?" Bess asked.

"Just have to go up here . . ."

*Here* being a winding step of roots that then became branches, leading through a wanly glowing archway inside a rotting trunk. Was this where Elli lived? Oddly, though, this strange little hideaway had a further stairway within it, lit by strips of light that gleamed as they ascended over beautifully carved stretches of floor and roof. The fine-grained stairway swirled on and up. There were intricate settings of jewel and marquetry. And now, at last, there was sunlight ahead.

" . . . Nearly there . . ."

An ivy-embroidered gate screeched on a final rise of marble steps. Bess had expected to emerge at some eyrie close to Ghezirah's roof, but it was immediately apparent that they were on solid ground. This was a kind of garden—trees, buildings, and strange eruptions of statuary tumbled all around them—yet it was oddly quiet; filled with a decrepit kind of peace.

"Where by Al'Toman *is* this?"

"Can't you tell?"

It wasn't so very hard. In fact, now that Bess was getting her bearings, it was obvious. Over there, seen at a slightly different angle from the view she was used to, lay the placid browns of the farm islands of Windfell. That way, churning with what was surely the beginnings of a storm, was the vast seawall of the Floating Ocean. And below them, yet curling upwards in ways that the air and Bess's own senses struggled to bridge, marched the green crowns of the nameless forest, and beyond that, flecked with the red hollows where the bloodflowers flourished, lay the small circle of her meadow.

"You can't *live* on the Isle of the Dead?"

"Why not? You live inside that iron carbuncle."

It was a given even in nursery books that the island city of Ghezirah was more than simply a smooth globe encircling Sabil's star in three plain dimensions. Yet it was dizzying, and more than a little disturbing, to think that they had contrived to reach this place of the dead by climbing through the forest's roof. Still, Bess followed Elli as they explored.

Most of the tombs were very old, but older ones still were said to be buried in their foundations. Indeed, the most fanciful version of the tale of the Isle of the Dead's origins told of how the entire island consisted of nothing but mulched flesh, bone, and memorial. The place was certainly alarmingly uneven and ramshackle, and little frequented in modern times. The major churches now all had their own mausoleums, while many of the lesser ones favored remote planets of rest. The Warrior Church, meanwhile, found no home for its servants other than in its memories, for its acolytes were always expected to die in battle.

Hayawans ambled around carved sandstone pillars. Spirit projections flickered and dissolved like marshghosts. The voices of ancient recordings called from stone mouths muffled by birds' nests. But it was the fecund sense of *life* in this place that struck Bess most. The bumbling insects. The frantic birdsong. The heady scents and colors of the blooms. There were fruits, as well, which would have made the pomegranate seem homely, and Elli explained that this island was also a fine place for trapping foxes, for catching airhorses, for collecting honeyseed, and for digging up and broiling moles.

"So you live here alone?"

Elli gave a shrugging nod. That much was obvious, Bess supposed.

"So how did you—"

"Come here? Is *that* what you're wondering?" Elli's face was suddenly flushed. "You think I'm some kind of grave-robbor or ghoul?"

Bess attended to removing a speck of grit from her scabbard. After all, she could hardly accuse someone else of being secretive about their origins when there was an empty space where there should have been her own. Just that noisy dormitory, and no sense of anything before. As if, impossibly, she had been born into her novitiate fully functioning and whole. Apart from that locket, which meant nothing at all. But no, there *was* something more than that, she thought, looking around at this pretty home of the long-dead. Some bleak moment of horror from which her mind recoiled. The most sense she could make of it was that her church had plucked her from something so terrible that the best way to keep hold of her sanity had been to empty the knowledge from her brain. And now, somehow, the shivering thought trickled through her, something was pulling her back there.

Elli pointed. "You see that building, the one with the copper birch tree growing out of the middle?"

It was a dome that still partly retained its covering of mosaic glass. It looked to be on fire, the way the leaves flickered above them.



"Do you want to take a look?"

Bess's head gave its usual slow nod.

"There was a girl buried there. Oh . . . a long time ago," Elli explained as they clambered over the ruins. "Before the War of Lilies, when the seasons were unchanging, and even time itself was supposed to run more slow. Anyway, she was young when she died, and her birth mother and her bond mothers were stricken. So they made this fine mausoleum for her, and they filled it with everything about their daughter, every toy and footstep and giggle and memory. You see . . ."

They were standing beneath the dome. The tree shifted through its fractured lenses, giving the displays a dusty life. Animatronic toys seemed to jerk. Strewn teddy bears still had a residual glint of intelligence in their button eyes. But that, and the swishing leaves, only made the sense of age and loss more apparent.

"And they visited her here . . . And they prayed . . . And they cried . . . And, dead though their daughter was, they swore that her memory would never die. But of course—"

"What was this girl's name? Are you—?"

"—Shut up and listen, will you, Bess! Her name was Dallah, and I'm called Elli if you haven't noticed. So no, I'm not Dallah. Although Dallah *was* my friend. My best friend, you might say. In fact, my only one. You see, Dallah was like most only children who've been longed for a bit too much by their mothers, and find themselves over-protected and alone. Of course, Dallah had all these toys . . ." Elli pinged a bike-bell. "And she could have anything else she ever wanted. She only had to ask. But what she really wanted, the one thing her mothers couldn't give her for all their kindness and wealth, was a friend. So . . ." Elli ran a finger over a cracked glass case that seemed to be filled with nothing but leaves and dust. ". . . she did what most girls have done since Eve first grew bored with Adam. She made one up. And her name *was* Elli. And that's me. That's who I am."

Bess had been gazing into a hologlass pillar that contained the floating faces of three women. They looked kindly, but impossibly sad.

"I was just intended as another part of the memorial," Elli said. "They extracted me from every breath and memory of their beloved daughter. Sweet little pretend-Elli, who always had to have a place laid for her at table, and did all the naughty and disruptive things to which Dallah herself would never confess. Elli who stole all the doughnuts, even though it was Dallah who fell sick. Elli who crayoned that picture of a clown's face on the haremlek wall. They'd come to me in the years after to reminisce. This whole mausoleum, they couldn't stop building and refining it. Nothing was ever enough. They kept Dallah herself within a glass coffin inside a suspension field so she didn't decay. Not, of course, that they could ever bring themselves to actually look at their dead daughter, but she was unchanging, perfectly there. They couldn't let her go. Even when they were old, the mothers came. But then there were only two of them. And then just the one, and she grew so confused she sometimes thought I was Dallah. Then she stopped coming as well, and the slow centuries passed, and the gardeners rusted and the maintenance contracts expired. And people no longer came to pay their respects to anyone on the Isle of the Dead. There were just these crumbling mausoleums and a few flickering intelligences. The thing is, Dallah's mothers had tried too hard, done too much. And the centuries are *long* when you're an imaginary friend and you have nobody to play with—and I mean body in every sense . . ."

Elli had been wandering the mausoleum as she talked, touching color-faded stacks of studded brick and dolls with missing eyes. But now she was standing beside that long glass case again. Which, Bess now saw, was shattered along one side.

"So you took hold of Dallah's corpse?"



"What *else* was I do to? She had no use for it, and her mothers are long dead. If I looked in a mirror, if there *was* a mirror here that was clear enough, I suppose I might see a face that would remind me a bit of Dallah. But I'm not Dallah. Dallah's dead and mourned for and in Paradise or wherever with William Galileo and Albert Shakespeare and all the rest. I'm Elli. And I'm me. And I'm here." She stuck out her tongue. "So there!"

Bess had heard of the concept of body-robbing, and knew that most of the major churches forbade it. The punishments, she imagined, would be severe, especially if the robber happened to be something that couldn't properly call itself sentient. But Elli's tale, and that final pink protrusion of her tongue, made the deed hard to condemn. It was better, though, that she stayed eating berries and broiling moles on the Isle of the Dead. In any other part of Ghezirah, or any of the other Ten Thousand and One Worlds, life for her would be not so much difficult as impossible, and would most likely be brought to a rapid end.

"How long have things been like this?"

Elli now looked awkward. "I don't know. I . . ." She looked up at the hissing, dancing roof. ". . . Can we leave this place?"

It was good to be back out in the warm afternoon, even if all the falling memorials were now a constant reminder to Bess that this was a place of the dead. But as for Elli, she thought, as she gazed at her friend sitting on a pile of rocks with her arms wrapped around her grubby knees, she's right in what she says. She isn't some ghoul or monster. She's truly alive. Then Bess's eyes trailed down to that lightgun. The reason it looked like a toy, she realized, was that it had probably once been one. But she didn't doubt that it was now deadly, or that Elli knew how to use it. In her own way, this little grave-runt was as much a warrior as Bess was.

It seemed a time for confidences, so Bess explained what little there was to explain about her own life. The long days of endless practice. The even longer dormitory nights. The laughing chants. That sense of not properly belonging even in a community of outcasts. And now—the way her entire church and all its intelligences seemed to have withdrawn from her, when she'd been expecting to face some kind of ultimate challenge through which she could prove her worth.

"You mean, like a dragon or something? A monster that needs killing?"

She nodded. A dragon, or even a quasi-dragon, would certainly have done. Anything, no matter how terrible, would have been better than this. It was as if she'd been thrown back into the empty nowhere from which she had come, but pointlessly trained in swordplay and changed into the thing she now was . . .

Something patted down Bess's scales, leaving blurry silver trails that her camouflage struggled to mimic. After a long moment's puzzlement, she realized it was tears.

"Don't you have any idea of your earlier life?" Elli asked. "I mean, some hint or memory?"

Bess gave an armor-plated shrug, and rumbled about the piece of jewelry that she happened to possess. A thing on a chain, oval-shaped.

"You mean a locket?"

"I think it's called a locket, yes. You've heard of them?"

"Of course I have. I've got one myself. So—what's inside yours?"

"What do you mean, inside?"

Elli laughed and laid her small hand over Bess's much larger gauntlet.

"You really don't know much about anything other than killing things, do you, Bess?"

Then she explained how lockets came in two hinged halves—there were, after all, plenty of examples of this and every other kind of trinket to be found on this isle—although the main thing that Bess was conscious of as they talked was her friend's

close presence, and the strange and peculiarly delicious sensation of a hand touching her own strange flesh.

It was getting late. The dawn-singers had already made their first preparatory cries, stirring up an evensong of birds. Contrary to the once-popular saying, it proved far easier to depart the Isle of the Dead than to get there, and Elli soon led Bess back toward the same marble steps through which they had entered, and down into the depths of the forest that lay below. Moving through the pillared near-dark, Bess was conscious again of the danger of this place. Far more than the island above them, this was a landscape wherein monsters and wonders might abide. Yet Elli led on. The clearing lay ahead.

"You'll be here tomorrow?"

"Yes," Elli smiled. "I will."

Bess shambled across the meadowgrass, which, amid darker patches of blood-flower, already shone with dew. The caleche hissed open its door. She climbed in and laid down her sword. The keyhole eye at the center of the cabin's altar, which would surely soon bear her a fresh instruction, and perhaps even apologies for this pointless waste of her time, remained unseeingly dark. The food tray hissed out for her, and she ate. Then, as she prepared to lie down, she remembered what Elli had said about lockets. Vaguely curious, but somehow still feeling no great sense of destiny, she opened her small chest and lifted the thing out. After a moment of struggle, the two sides broke apart.

Another morning, and, although it was still too early for dawn, Bess was standing in the dim clearing outside her caleche with her sword. She, too, was a thing of dimness; her armor saw to that. But already the dawn-singers were calling. Light would soon be spilling from tower to tower. And there was Elli, standing out from the shadow trees, pale as stripped twig.

"Bess! You're here!" She was almost running. Almost laughing. Then she was doing both.

"I said I would, didn't I?" Bess's voice was as soft as it was capable of being. And as sad. It made Elli stop.

"What's happened?" They stood a few paces apart beside the rusty beetle of the caleche in the ungreying light. "You seem different."

"I haven't changed," Bess rumbled. "But I've brought you this. I want you to take it . . ." She held out the locket, glinting and swinging on its silver chain, from her hand's heavy claw.

"It's that thing you described . . ." Elli looked puzzled, hesitant. "The locket. But this is . . ." She took it in her own small fingers. Here, in the spot in which they were standing, the gaining light had a rosy flush. ". . . mine."

"Open it."

Elli nodded. Red flowers lay all around them. The silver of the locket was taking up their color, and Bess now seemed a thing entirely made of blood. Swiftly, with fingers far more practiced and easeful than Bess's, Elli broke open the locket's two sides. From out of which gleamed a projection, small but exquisite, of the faces of three women. They were the same faces that hung in the hologlass pillar of Dallah's mausoleum. But in this image they looked as happy as in the other they had been sad.

"Dallah's mothers," Elli breathed. "This thing is yours, Bess. But it's also mine . . ."

"That's right."

Elli snapped it shut. Dawn light was flowing around them now, and the blood-flowers made Elli beautiful, and yet they also made her pale and dangerous and sharp. "This doesn't really have to happen, does it?" she whispered.

"I think it does."

"Don't tell me, Bess." She almost smiled. "You remember it already . . . ?"

"I didn't—not at all. But I'm beginning to now. I'm sorry, Elli."

"And I'm sorry as well. Isn't there some way we can both just go our separate ways and live our own lives—you as a warrior and me just as me? Do I really have to do this to you?"

"We both do. Nothing is possible otherwise. We're joined together, Elli. We're a monstrosity, a twist in spacetime. Our togetherness is an affront to reality. It must be destroyed, otherwise even worse things will break through. There are no separate ways."

The killing moment was close. Bess could already hear the lightgun's poisonous hum. She knew Elli was quick, but she also knew that the use of any weapon, be it blade or laser, was the last part of a process that any trained warrior should be able to detect long before the final instant came. But how by all the intelligences was she supposed to do such a thing, when Elli was her own younger self?

Then it happened. All those hours of practice and training, all the imam's praises and curses, seemed to collide in a moment beyond time, and emerged into something deadly, precise, and perfect. For the first time in her fractured life, Bess executed *The Cold Step Beyond* with absolute perfection, and she and her blade were nowhere and in several places at once. Elli was almost as quick. And could easily have been quicker.

Yet she wasn't.

Or almost.

And that was enough.

Bess swung back, a blur of metal and vengeance, into the ordinary dimensions of the spreading dawn. Around her, still spraying and toppling, spewed the remains of Elli of the Isle of the Dead. Nothing but hunks of raw meat now, nothing you could call alive, even before the bits had thunked across the ground.

Bess stood there for a moment, her breathing unquickenng. Then she wiped and sheathed her sword. She knew now why the bloodflowers bloomed so well across this meadow. Without them, the strew of flesh that surrounded her would have been too horrible to bear. But something glinted there, perfect and unsullied. She picked it up.

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### ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

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Her blade had cut through everything else—time, life, probability, perhaps even love—but not the chain and locket. It was the one strand that held together everything else.

She remembered it all now. Remembered as if it had never been gone. Playing with Dallah—who had called her Elizabeth, or sometimes Elli, or occasionally Bess—all those aeons ago when she'd been little more than a hopeful ghost. Then pain and emptiness for the longest time until some kind of residual persistence took hold. It was, Bess supposed, the same kind of persistence that drives all life to strive to *become*, even if the body of someone once loved must be stolen in the process. Long seasons followed. There was little sense of growth or change. The once-sacred island around her slid further toward decay and neglect. But now she was Elli, and she had Dallah's discarded body and she was alive, and she learned that living meant knowing how to feed, which in turn meant knowing how to kill.

Elli had always been alone apart from a few of the other mausoleums' residual intelligences. But it wasn't until one warm summer's morning when the light seemed to hang especially pure that she looked down across at the other great islands, and saw something moving in a clearing with jagged yet elegant unpredictability, and realized she felt lonely. So she found a way down through the twisty forests that lay below the catacombs, and came at last to a space of open grass, and watched admiringly until she was finally noticed, and the monstrous thing came over to her in blurring flashes, and turned out to be not quite so monstrous at all.

But that locket. Which had once been Dallah's. Even as the Bess-thing held it out, Elli had understood that there was only one way that Bess could own it as well. That time, like the locket's chain, had looped around itself and joined them together in a terrible bond. And Elli then knew that only one of them could survive, because she was the monstrosity that this creature had been sent to kill.

The killing moment, when grace, power, and relentlessness are everything. But in the memory Bess now had of holding Elli's lightgun, the warrior-thing had hesitated, and her own laser had fired a jagged spray. Even as Bess gazed down at the remains of Elli's butchered body lain amid the bloodflowers, the memory of the burning stench of her own wrecked chitin and armor came back to her. She had died not once this dawn, but twice. And yet she was still living.

It was fully day now. The clearing dazzled with dew. Looking back toward her caleche, Bess saw that its door had opened, and that, even in this morning blaze, the light of her altar shone out. More questing, perhaps. More things to kill. Or an instruction for her to return and recuperate within her church's iron walls.

The intelligences of the Warrior Church were harsh and brutal, but they also welcomed the sorts of creature that no other church would ever think to accept. And now they had given Bess back her memory, and made her whole. She realized now why her earlier quests had seemed so pointless, and why she hadn't yet felt like a warrior at all. But she was truly a warrior, for she had taken that final step into the cold beyond, and been found not to be wanting.

Bess gazed at the open door of her caleche, and its eerie, beckoning glow. She had climbed in there once clutching that locket, been borne away in a long moment of forgetting to begin the life that had eventually brought her back here. But now her gaze turned toward the encircling forest, and she remembered that sense she had had of different dangers and mysteries lurking there. Wonders, perhaps, too.

The caleche awaited.

The light from its doorway blared.

Its engine began to hum.

Bess of the Warrior Church stood bloodied and head-bowed in a clearing in a nameless forest, wondering which way she should turn. ○

# Ancient Catch

The fisher casts his lines  
when morning is only  
an attenuation  
in the wet smoke  
that wreathes the water  
thick as tule fog.

On steppes above the sea  
where shadows run,  
and even shadows  
fall thinner  
than shadows once fell,  
deserted cities are  
baked in red clay.

Cities sway perceptibly  
in the rush of centuries.  
The fisher's catch lies  
writhing at his feet:  
sleek and monstrous,  
goggle-eyed,  
more atavistic than the  
broken skulls at Olduvai.

Hunkered and shadowless  
in his bank of fog,  
the fisher tends his lines,  
nurses a bruised hand,  
from the crease of a  
knuckle licks the patterning  
blood: warm and saline,  
on this lip of land,  
above a shallow sea.

—Bruce Boston

Carol Emshwiller has several collections on the horizon. PS Publishing is bringing out a collection of her newest stories, and the first volume of a two-book collection from Nonstop Press will consist of her early stories. Since Carol's been writing short fiction for over fifty-five years, there's more than enough excellent material for these publishers to share. Her latest little gem takes a look at what sort of society might develop when you're only exposed to . . .

# ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT

Carol Emshwiller

**T**he man who brings the news sometimes stays away a long time even when there must be plenty of news to tell. Or so it seems to us. He usually comes about every twelve or fourteen days, but we've been waiting for well over a month now. That's never happened before.

Considering the journey, everybody's nervous for fear something has happened to him on the way. Or we wonder if the news is so bad he doesn't dare bring it. Or it might be so embarrassing, so sexual maybe, that he doesn't want to talk about it.

But surely there's some interesting news to tell after four or five weeks have gone by: A wedding where the bride ran off with another man, or the death of a boy who thought he could fly, a six-toed baby, a horse who can count. . . . If he doesn't come to tell us we won't know anything about any of these.

Our newsman seems nice enough, but we don't trust him. He's from down there. I like him, though, and for the exact reason everybody else is wary of him—because he's *not* from here. Not that I trust him any more than the rest of us do.

We always keep a watch down the switchbacks to see if he's on his way up. When he comes, he plays a fancy tune on his flute to call us to the center of town. Sometimes he picks flowers along the way and gives them to us women. Once in a while he brings us things we never see around here: a harmonica, an orange, balloons . . . once, a half dozen flutes just like his. The things can't be heavy; he has a long, hard way to go. Now we wonder if he's quit this job and didn't even come to tell us the news of his quitting.

Of course he could be drowned in the rushing rivers, or lying in some gully with a broken leg. They say there's a wobbly hanging bridge. They say there's two mountain passes. Our newsman says it takes him a week to get here. He says there's many dangers along the way and that the hanging bridge is ready to collapse.



I'll go and look for him. After all, I'm dispensable. I have no children and no family left. I'm not good for much else than running off on what may be a useless journey. I'll gather up the news myself. And I have one of those flutes, though I can't play it. I'll bring it and learn to play it on the way. I'll surprise everybody when I get back.

They'll say, "What do you know about helping a wounded person? Or about camping out on the trail? And you don't know good news from bad." They'll say, "You're too old" or, "You're too young. And do we need the news? Look how we're getting along without it." But after all those they'll say, "Take along bandages and something to use as a splint."

I not only pack up bandages and a splint, but special herbs in case he's lying along the trail in pain. I start down the switchbacks, everybody waving until I round the corner of the cliff. They call out, "Bring us some surprises," and, "Bring us good news." I've never been especially good news before, but maybe I can be now.

No matter what they say, I *do* know something about news. I know the price of eggs down there isn't important to us up here. I know scandals are interesting even when we don't know the people involved. Murders are always good. And news is important. You can't be an educated person without knowing who died.

I bring a big notebook. I don't trust myself to remember things as our newsman did. Besides, I like to draw.

As I go, I keep looking around for him. I look over cliffs. Behind boulders. Even when the streams are far below, I study them. It makes for slow going.

The first evening I get out my flute. I don't make much progress. I learn one simple little tune. Sort of. My fingers don't stay on the little holes. Our newsman could do trills and rills and flourishes and he doesn't have a flute any fancier than this one.

Next day I find a landslide has blocked the trail. *Big* landslide! So . . . No wonder. It takes me half the afternoon to climb around it. A dangerous climb, too, but I keep reminding myself there's a whole new life out there. And maybe other news to hear that we don't know anything about. The big notebook I brought is heavy and I think about leaving it. Though maybe not yet. This may be the hardest climb and I've already done it.

To be a news-gathering person you have to be spry. Our newsperson was . . . *is* spry. And he's all muscle. For sure he could climb above and around the landslide better than I did. I hope he isn't at the bottom of this pile of fallen rocks. I begin to feel even more worried than I already was.

I've always liked him more than I should, but I'm pretty sure he wouldn't care for any of us from up here even though he brings us sewing needles sometimes and always flirts. (Once he leaned so close . . . his black eyes. . . And I knew mine were only a pale greenish-tan.) But we're too countrified. All we know is what he tells us.

I keep on, slowly, looking for signs of him. Every now and then I think I see him partly behind a boulder. I climb down to it, but, so far, it's never him. I pass the hanging bridge. It hasn't collapsed. As I cross it, I study the river and rocks below for a body.

Another two days and I begin to see terraces and goats and goat herders. I'm getting closer to where the news begins. Even with all that looking behind every other rock, it hasn't taken me a week.

At the last high hill, I stop and look over at the town below before going in. It's so big it's scary. Where I live everybody knows everybody else, but I don't think that can be true here. I stand there a long time trying to make sense of the place. Streets curve and curve . . . more and more of them . . . around a large central square. Even this early in the morning, I can see there's already a lot of action down there. The news that's told in that square must be great and grand. I study the streets so I can find my way to it. I see odd places where houses have all fallen down in a row.



I didn't find any sign of our newsman along the way so I'm worried. Should I look for his mother and tell her something might have happened to her son? His name is Flimm but I don't even know if that's his first name or his last.

It's all downhill now. I trot along. I'm scared but excited about my future life . . . I know for sure it will never be the same.

It's a nice smooth road except for a couple of spots nearer the town, where there are such big holes they cut it right in two. Why didn't our newsman tell us about this road? Also about how big the town is? My people would love to hear about it.

As I come into town I can see right away how countrified I am. My pants are too wide and loose. We always have big bright sashes but nobody here does, not a one. And I don't see anybody with their hair tied back and up in a knot on the top of their head.

I find my way to the main square. It's early and they're setting up a market just like we have only this one is much bigger. Right in the middle, there's a fountain with a naked lady. Or there used to be. Thank goodness her top half is mostly broken off. I'd be embarrassed if it wasn't. The bottom part of her arm is still there, against her hip, and still holds a vase out of which a trickle of water is dribbling into the small pond below, but the pond is cracked and there's only a little puddle in the bottom of it. A woman is sitting on the edge and holding up a teapot to catch the trickle.

People are putting up stalls and tables. At one stall they're already selling a sort of pancake with fruit in it. Next to that there's someone cooking sausages. Suddenly I'm hungry for food that's not dried. I never thought about needing money. None of us did. I have all these useless bandages and herbs and a splint, but not a single cent. We should have realized it would be much more civilized down here and everybody would need money. I wonder if the news is also more civilized here than our countrified news up there. No wonder our newsman never mentioned smooth roads. They're used to that. It's probably the winding trails that are news to them.

I sit down, my back against a ruined wall, and watch. I'm less conspicuous sitting down than walking along in my odd clothes. I nibble at my dried food and watch people drinking red and yellow drinks and a fizzy drink that's surely beer, and wish I had some money.

A giant horse walks right by me only a few yards away. He's led by an ordinary sized girl. We only have burros. I do know about horses, but I didn't know they could get this big. I'm sure that horse is here in the square to be put on display because it's the biggest horse in the world. That certainly is news my town would be interested in. Also all these different clothes.

I take out my notebook and begin to draw. I draw people in tight pants or short skirts with their lacy underwear hanging out below. I draw the big black horse towering over them. I even draw the broken statue of the fountain. I wonder why our newsman never thought this broken lady was news. And he never drew things. I think my people will like my news at least as much as his.

There are lots of fruits and vegetables here I never saw before. (Some have warts. Some have long curved necks. Some are purple.) And the vegetable we use the most up there isn't here at all. Not a single one. I draw the odd ones, though without color they won't show very well. I write "orange," "red," and "purple" under my drawings.

I draw the lady in the striped skirt across from where I sit. She's selling silvery jewelry and making new things as she sits there. Her crutches are beside her. She only has one leg. Next to her is a person selling fish. He only has one arm. They're sitting on chairs that fold up in a clever way. I draw a diagram of how the chairs work. Over on my side there's a man setting up an easel. He asks if I want my portrait drawn. "For only ten," he says. I do, but I have to say no, because I don't have any money.

Then I realize I should write out the news of our newsman. How he's most likely

crushed under that big landslide. I put in how hard it was to climb over and around the slide. I do such a good job about him being crushed and smothered I actually make myself cry.

I look up at the bustle of the square to calm myself. By now it's crowded and noisy. There are more different kinds of clothes here than up home, but even so not a single person is dressed at all like I am.

That big horse is standing there, at the back of a stall, *not* as if on display and nobody is paying any attention to it. It's as if all their horses are this big. Nobody is paying any attention to the fountain with the bottom half of a naked lady either. So this . . . *all* this, is what it's like to be civilized and citified.

And then, across the square, there he is, Flimm himself. Looking perfectly all right—obviously not thinking about us and the news at all.

I feel all trembly. I always do whenever I see him . . . because of his black, black eyes . . . because of his black, black hair, his . . . yes, his ugly weathered face. . . . Only now I'm also all trembly with shock and anger. He's forgotten all about us. And he's with a woman. Much more beautiful than any of us. Her hair is not only as wonderfully dark as his, but long and wavy. We, up there, mostly have lank pale hair and it's hardly ever wavy.

How can he have forgotten us like this? Not even tried to send somebody else? Though maybe he did and that's the person who got crushed in the landslide. I shouldn't judge. Not yet.

He's not dressed at all like he is up there, where he's always wearing his mountain-climbing clothes. What he has on now fits better and is shiny and smooth. He looks wonderful. Still just as ugly but cleaner and freshly shaved and combed.

Here's lots of news my people would like to hear about, but I'd hardly know how to tell it. I need more facts and I know enough about news to know it shouldn't just be my angry opinion right now. News is supposed to be done with both sides in mind and never in a temper. I need to keep my own opinion out of it. He's the one told us that. He never ever told us what he thought about the news he brought. When we asked how he felt about things, he'd look sly and make jokes.

I know all about everybody's life up there but I know nothing of his. In fact, now that I see this place, I know that I know even less about him than I thought. If he's married, we don't know about it, though he certainly flirts with all us women. And we all have hopes but we never talk about it. We all think: What if he took one of us down and up, and up and down, and all the way to town? What an adventure that would be! Except now I've gotten here all on my own.

I think to yell: Hey, it's Darta! I'm here! All this way by myself. For you. In case you were hurt along the way.

But I wonder if he'll remember me at all—though he'll recognize the way we dress. Then I think to hide and watch . . . see where he'll go, what he'll do. I sit still and carefully don't look straight at him. I'm thinking how I've come all this way to find him. I've looked over every cliff in case he's lying there dead or hurt. I've written his death down. I've cried for him, and here he moves along the stalls hanging on to a beautiful woman's elbow. . . . I have to hold myself back from attacking him. News people never do that.

When he and the woman start to leave the square, I get up and follow. I stay well back. I try to keep behind people and in the shadows.

Then I see the smallest dog in the world. No doubt headed toward the square to go on display next to the biggest horse. He's carried in a fancy little bag by a lady in the narrowest skirt I ever saw. It has a big slit in the side, but even so she has to take small steps. Also she's wearing the highest heeled shoes I ever saw. I suppose she's

going to the square to show off her skirt and shoes. I stop to watch, just for a minute, to admire how she manages to walk as well as she does . . . and I lose Flimm.

I hurry around the corner (glad for my flat shoes and wide pants) and then around a different corner, past a long row of fallen-down houses, but I only get more and more lost. Then I hear a flute in the distance, playing with the trills and flourishes exactly the way Flimm plays. I follow the music around a corner and there, sitting on the ground . . .

I'm too angry to be a proper newsperson. I look around for a rock to use as a bludgeon, but there isn't one handy, even with those fallen-down houses just around the corner. I'll attack anyway. He's sitting down. I'll kick . . .

But it's not Flimm.

I fall over backward trying to stop myself.

It's a ragged round-faced boy. Hardly in his teens. He's wearing loose dirty clothes. His face is full of odd little scars. He's nothing at all like Flimm.

I lie there saying I'm sorry, over and over. And the boy is saying, "But you didn't kick me, you just almost did." And "Thanks for not doing it."

He helps me to sit up and gives me a drink from his water bottle.

How am I going to find Flimm now? He shouldn't get away with this. We thought he was our friend. If he needed a woman, we had many. Maybe not as beautiful as those down here, but even though unsophisticated, quite nice ones.

And then there was me. And I'm getting more sophisticated every minute.

I move over next to the boy, take out my notebook, and cross out everything I wrote about Flimm. Then I draw the smallest dog in the world and the woman with the tight skirt. In spite of Flimm being alive and well, I'm glad I came. This place is interesting. I also write about the boy playing the flute. His name is Jall. Later I'll ask his age and write that down, too, but he's gone back to playing his flute. I've practiced every single night on the trail and I still can't play very well. This boy, as Flimm does, has a flute no better than mine, and he can play all sorts of fancy things. I wonder if he can teach me some of those rills. I don't have any money though, and everything here is so civilized it takes money.

I still feel like kicking somebody. I'll have to tell everybody back home that Flimm dropped us and without a word. I'll tell them these people are not our kind at all. They even pronounce half their words all wrong. They call the square the squire. They eat all sorts of odd things. . . . No wonder our newsman has such a long nose.

I write all this down and then take out my flute. I play one of my simple tunes. (By now I know five.) The boy and I both laugh at how simple it is and how badly I play it. Then we play together, me, the simple tune, and he, the ornaments and harmonies around it. I had no idea I could ever sound this good. Of course it's what he's playing that makes me sound so great, it's almost as if I can really play.

Somebody drops coins into the dust in front of us. We laugh again and play some more. After a bit we gather up our coins. "We ought to go to the square," he says. "You should stand up there in your funny clothes and I'll sit beside you and play the ornaments."

I'm thinking how I could eat some of those odd fruits. Maybe have my portrait drawn.

So he leads the way to the square. He has a really bad limp. He could never climb up to visit us. Even with me helping, he'd never get across our mountains.

We pick practically the same spot where I sat before, only now it's sunny. The portrait man has moved farther down into the shade. I stand and the boy sits at my feet. We make a good team and my clothes are an asset.

Though the portrait painter has lots of customers, he comes over to draw us and then again and again because people buy his pictures of us for more money than

they pay for their own portraits. He says my costume helps, and I think: What costume? But to them I guess it is.

We play all day and make a lot of money. More than I ever had before. And the portrait painter gives us some of what he makes on our pictures, too. He says it's only fair. And then he gives us one of the pictures of us and Jall says it can be mine.

Then we buy some fruit and I get myself a sausage.

This is all really good news. I can't wait to go back and tell about it. I'd bring Jall back, too, if he didn't have such a limp. It is nicer there than here. Here they don't even have one single great view, not a one, though they do have everything else. I wonder if I could bring the smallest dog in the world back with me.

I do keep looking out for Flimm, though everything is so interesting I forget to be angry. I keep wondering if Flimm and I could sound as good together as Jall and I do.

When the market begins to thin out, and people start to undo their stalls and pack up, they hitch that biggest horse in the world to a huge cart. Again, a girl no bigger than I am leads him off. I wish I'd had the courage to go up to that horse and stroke him the way she does.

Jall and I divide up the money. I didn't bring anything for a purse so I put my share in with the last of my dried food. I wonder if I have enough to buy that smallest dog in the world. Or that horse. Though I don't think I could get that horse across the hanging bridge and all the way home.

This is a very exciting place, everything here is news, but I still need to find Flimm. How do people find people around here? His safety is all my people really want to know about. They'd like the biggest horse and the smallest dog, but they wouldn't be satisfied until I told them about Flimm. I should have stopped him when I first saw him even though I was scared to. I felt so angry and trembly I wasn't sure what I'd do.

Jall and I decide to spend the night right here where there's a little water for washing and to drink. The sound of the dripping fountain is pleasant and soothing. In the morning he'll help me find Flimm.

We stick to our same corner next to the tumbledown wall. It's out of the way.

But even with the soothing sound of the fountain, I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking about Flimm and that woman and how silly it is to be in love with somebody from here that I hardly know.

Maybe I'm in love with him simply because he brought us the outside world. Or simply because he's different. Or because he jokes all the time. But there must be lots of men like Flimm down here. I should look around. It would have to be somebody who doesn't limp if I want to take him home and show him off up there.

Just after I finally get to sleep, first thing in the morning . . .

. . . someone shakes my shoulder.

"Darta. Darta."

Here *he* is . . . looking down at me. The slicked-up Flimm. . . . All in black, freshly shaved, hair combed, and I, for sure, the opposite.

I wake as if to a happy dream.

He remembers my name!

He asks a whole row of questions: "What happened? How did you get here? Why? What's wrong? Are you all right?"

As if the news was the other way around, from me to him.

He says it was one of those drawings of us that showed him where we might be. They're all over town. They show the corner of the square and the ruined wall.

I'm still half asleep. Is it really him? I say, "I looked for you all along the trail. We thought you were dead or hurt. I cried for you."

I reach up. He . . . for heaven's sake, kisses my hand . . . a *long* kiss . . . lips so warm and soft. Sits down beside me.

I say again, "I cried for you."

Then I actually do wake up. This is no dream. Here I am, rumpled and dirty, dressed in clothes nobody wears down here, and he, so clean and citified. What chance do I have? And why is he always flirting? Doing odd things like kissing hands?

I'll make the news myself. I'll *be* the news and I don't want to see both sides. Even Flimm has said there aren't always two sides to things.

Besides, how come such an ugly man gets to have such a beautiful woman as that one he was walking with yesterday? And here he is being flirtatious even to me right now, and enjoying himself. How can he be so happy after all our worry?

I attack.

I catch him by surprise. Right away he's down on his back trying to defend himself. He doesn't hit out at me at all but I hit and hit. Scratch and bite and kick.

Jall wakes up. He's a skinny lame boy so he can't be much help,

But instead of coming to help me, he starts to play the flute. A sad wavy tune. That stops us. And almost right away. Or rather stops *me*. Flimm was just protecting himself.

I sit back. News people don't cry. Is it the music or just everything in general?

What with Jall playing that sad tune and the surprise of it, I'm calm but Flimm isn't. He grabs me, one strong hand on my arm. I'll bet I'll have bruises there.

I've never seen him angry. He didn't hit out at me as I was hitting him, but now he looks as if he'd like to. He looks scary. I can see his jaw clenching and unclenching.

I duck down and try to pull away. I know he's going to hit me and I deserve it. Except he doesn't.

"What's all this about? Why?"

"For you. We worried. There was a landslide. We thought the hanging bridge had broken. I looked for you in all the cliffs."

It's then I begin to actually cry.

He tries to put his arm around me to hug me, but I pull away. "You're in love," I say.

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw you yesterday. That woman."

He starts to laugh. I know him well enough to know he laughs about everything, but even this?

"I'm in love, yes, with your mountain village and all of you gentle, sweet women. You're not like the women down here. I prefer how sweet you all are compared to the town women. How innocent . . ."

"I don't believe it."

"Look around you. Wouldn't you want relief from this?"

And suddenly I see.

"I never told you of the war. I never told you of these bombed-out houses. Look at his ruined wall. . . . Our broken fountain . . . The news I brought you was always false."

How could I not have seen it right away, back at the bombed-out road? What kind of newsperson am I to be so blind? He said "how sweet" we are. He's right, we're much too sweet. But is it my fault if I'm innocent, since he never told us anything real?

"And I never worried you with our epidemics. How many of us died . . . Look at this boy's pockmarked face."

Jall, too. I never thought . . . all this really real news . . .

"You were our hidden garden . . . for the Preservation of Innocence. I came back and told news of you to the town. I brought your births and deaths and marriages back here. Now there's no longer the time or money for the trek out there. We'll miss hearing about you. We were all in love with you."

"But you taught us the news was honorable. You said it should be even-handed. Fair. And true."

"We needed you to be as you are. Our world was falling apart. We kept thinking: At least there's our mountain village, safe and sound."

"If you won't bring us the news, *I'll* do it. And my news will be real."

"There's mountain storms. There's rockslides. Steep drop-offs. A woman can't do it."

"Of course I can. I've just been through it. And, look, my notebook is full of news. I drew the news, too. The biggest horse, the smallest dog . . . It's all here."

"Stay here with me. Come and meet my mother. She has always wanted to meet one of the sweet women from the High Hidden Garden. Nothing good will come from telling your people the real news. Come."

"No!"

I can't believe I'm refusing him. I always thought, if I ever had the chance, I'd run away with Flimm without a second thought.

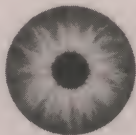
I don't want to hurt him. I tell him I'm tempted, "But I'd rather bring real news to my people. They deserve it. They don't want to be somebody else's High Hidden Garden for the Preservation of Innocence." ○

## Red Eye

In every man a demon lies;  
in photographs, we see its eyes,  
wild-fire flames of lust and rage,  
blood fires that do not dim with age.

In women's eyes you'll see its fires  
of smothered fury, wild desires,  
that smolder slow but hotter burn  
and woe to those whose hate it earns.

In children's eyes, its fires you'll see  
flame up in gleeful savagery  
un-tinged by guilt, without regret,  
a silent but still deadly threat.



"It's lens refraction" wise men say,

"not fire! It only looks that way."

Deep down, we know that looks betray  
things science can't explain away.

—William John Watkins



# WALKING STICK FIRES

Alan DeNiro

Alan DeNiro was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, and now resides outside St. Paul, Minnesota. He received a BA in English from the College of Wooster and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Virginia. His short story collection, *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead*, was published by Small Beer Press, and was a finalist for the Crawford Award. The author's first novel, *Total Oblivion, More or Less*, appeared from Spectra last year. He's currently working on a historical fantasy about the Dutch painter Vermeer. Alan's first story for us relates the remarkable road trip of two peculiar buddies. They journey through a landscape that, while almost familiar, manages to completely upend reality as we know it.

On All Hallows Eve Eve, Parka sat on his motorcycle in the unending desert. The moon was a low-hanging fruit. The blue fires of Casino were off in the far distance to the north. Parka pulled an apple out of his jacket pocket, cut it in half with his claw, and offered one half to his fellow traveler, Jar.

"The apple has a pleasing scent," Jar said before he ate it, crushing the apple into pulp with his mandibles.

"I would have to agree," Parka said.

"Where did you procure it?"

"In a house outside of Casino." He indicated the blazing pyramids and monoliths with his claw. "Two days ago. I forgot I had it. There it was, sitting on a kitchen table. Red and perfect." When he finished eating the apple, Parka brushed off a posse of stick insects that landed on his shoulders.

"Hey, cool, walking sticks," Jar said, brushing them off Parka's jacket.

"Is that what the locals call them? I just don't know where these bugs come from," Parka said.

"They are everywhere," Jar said, cleaning his mandibles with his fingers afterward.

Parka watched the walking sticks rattle on the hard desert ground.

"All right," Parka said, kicking his motorcycle to life. The reactors shot into clutch for a second and then hummed. Jar followed with his. "Santa Fey then?"

"They are expecting us."

Parka patted his satchel, the one containing the Amulet of Ruby Webs, which he had extracted from Casino at great cost.

"Yes they are. I do not expect traffic. Or to encounter those we disposed of."



Parka was thinking of the Worm-Hares.

"Not under the mountains."

"Nope."

Parka leaned forward and his bike shot ahead. Jar soon followed. After they broke the sound barrier, Parka put on his headphones. He liked Toby Keith.

In the great tunnel underneath the mountains, they stopped at a rest stop. They hydrated and Jar sulfurized his joints. There were a couple of other travelers at the rest stop. Others sped by on their motorcycles and flaming chariots. Every once in a while there would be a rumbling sound that would shake the wire grating of the low roof and send dust to the ground. Once there was a low growl far above, like a brane gun backfiring.

"What's that?" Jar asked once.

"Taos," Parka said, not looking up from his hammock and his well-thumbed copy of *The Toby Keith Review*.

"Ah," Jar said, going back to his sour acupuncture.

The human child who was indentured to the rest stop looked up from his abacus. He had a nametag that said SHARON. "They've been going like that for a fortnight. The Black Rooster Company is finally yielding their fortress against the Azalean Gullet."

But the two couriers ignored him. Blushing, the child went back to his figures.

"Say," Parka said, "what are you going to be for All Hallows Eve?"

Jar pulled the needle from his spine and blew on the tip. "I was thinking Jack Nicklaus."

"Really? I love *As Good as It Gets!*"

Three of Jar's eyelids quivered, a sign of confusion and then mild amusement. "No, not the actor. The golfer."

Parka raised his eyebrows. "Really? Do you golf?"

Jar shrugged. "Who are you going to be?"

"Dwight D. Eisenhower," Parka said without any hesitation.

"Really? I love World War II!" It took Parka a few seconds to realize Jar was being a sarcastic mimic.

Parka sighed.

"But seriously," Jar said, perhaps sensing Parka's exasperation, "I would have sworn that you'd be one of the indigenous musicians." Jar pointed at the cover of *The Toby Keith Review*, in which Toby was performing in his moon-slave cage for various Being seneschals.

"I'm not quite so easily typecast, friend," Parka said. "Not quite so easily in one box or another. I have a lot of interests."

"Uh-huh," Jar said.

"Anyway," Parka said, wanting to change the subject a bit, "it won't matter if we can't make Santa Fey by tomorrow."

"Ha ha," Jar said. "Don't worry. We're in the slow season. We're deep underground. The winds of war are incapable of blowing upon our faces."

"I am not quite so sanguine," Parka said, closing his magazine and hopping off the hammock. "We should go."

"So soon?" Jar said. "I still need to sanitize my needles." He held a glinting needle out. The tip wavered.

Parka was going to say something clever and lewd but the sound of an approaching caravan drowned out any coherent thought. Three motorcycles and a black Camaro. They were slowing down and resting at the rest stop.

"Hey, Jar," Parka shouted, before the caravan stopped.

Jar looked over. It was a caravan of Casino dwellers, all Worm-Hares.

"Ugh," Parka said. "Like I said, let's go."

"Hey!" the prime Worm-Hare said, slithering out of the Camaro. It was too late. "Hey!"

"What?" Parka called out.

The other Worm-Hares had hopped off their motorcycles and were massing together. The prime pointed at the Amulet of Ruby Webs that was half-hidden in Jar's satchel. "I believe you have something of ours!" he said.

"It's not yours anymore," Jar said. "So you should have said, 'I believe you have something of yours!'"

Parka had to shake his head at this. Even in danger, he had trouble not to break out laughing. This, at least, gave them a couple of seconds while the Worm-Hares tried to parse this out.

"The Amulet of Ruby Webs is a sacred symbol for our community through many generations and systems," the prime said.

"Well, it's your damn fault you brought it down from orbit then."

The prime paused. The other Worm-Hares were getting antsy, stroking their floppy ears with their tentacles. They likely surmised that Parka and Jar would be difficult to slay in close-quarters combat. Or perhaps they were worried about damaging the amulet.

"How about we race for it?" the prime said brightly.

"No, you can't have a good race in the tunnel and you know that," Parka said. "Hm, I will kickbox you for it though."

All of the Worm-Hares laughed as one. "Seriously?" the prime said. "Um, okay. Sure."

"Great. If I win you'll have to leave us alone. And . . ." Parka thought about it. "Give up driving your Camaro for a year. No, wait, you'll have to give it to him." He pointed to the human child. "Aw yeah, that's right. Are you ready?"

The prime nodded and smiled, but then grew grim. "But, listen. Hey. I'm being serious here. Whatever you do, do not—*do not*—touch the red button on the center of the Amulet of Ruby Webs. Okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry," Parka said dismissively. "I'm no amateurish idiot."

"Fair enough," the prime said. "I am going to enjoy kicking your ass." The residents of Casino were known for their kickboxing prowess, and the Worm-Hares learned such local arts after they followed the Beings down to the surface.

"You sure about this?" Jar said to Parka, putting his hand on Parka's shoulder as he was doing stretches.

"Not really," he said. "But this is the only way they'll stay off our ass. So we can make it to Hallows Eve."

Jar nodded. "Right. Hey, look at that kid's face."

Parka looked over. The face was beginning to fill with walking sticks. Circling the neck, darting down the cheeks. The child was fearful, but was unable to brush the insects off, because of the chains.

"What is *with* that?" Parka said, as he stepped into the makeshift kickboxing ring, an enclosure of the Worm-Hares' motorcycles. "Seriously, do any of you know what is going on with those insects?" He pointed to the human. None of the Worm-Hares paid Parka any mind. The prime took off his leather jacket and Parka did the same. Then the Worm-Hares—and Jar too, for that matter—counted down to ten and the kickboxing match began.

Parka then entered a trance-like state, without his consent or volition. When he snapped out of it, the prime Worm-Hare was sprawled on the asphalt, his head twisted backward, tentacles twitching here and there.

"Wow," Jar said. "What happened?"

"I have no idea," Parka said. "What *did* happen?"

"He tried to kick your face, but you spun away. Then you kicked his face."

"Oh." Parka felt a few of the walking sticks scurry and drop off his shoulders, which felt sore. He didn't realize that they had landed on him. The other Worm-Hares were motionless and scared.

As Parka and Jar drove away, they noticed that the human child's body was entirely covered in the walking sticks. Parka tried to make eye contact, as a way of saying, Hey, the Camaro's yours, I hope you get to drive it someday, but there were no eyes visible to connect with.

A few hours later in the tunnel, they had to stop again. Flashing lights and a tall human woman wearing a sandwich board.

"Bypass," the woman said.

"Oh, for the love of God," Parka said.

"Cave-in," the woman elaborated. She also had a nametag that said SHARON. "You'll have to go to the surface."

"You think?" Parka said.

"Hey, she's just doing her job," Jar said.

"I know that, Jar," Parka said. "And don't lecture me like I'm some kind of phobe. I mean, I'm the one who gave a Camaro to a human child. I'm a friend of these people, believe me."

"Whatever you say," Jar muttered.

"Shoot," Parka said, trying to focus. "Let's see, we're about three hours away from Santa Fey by the tunnel. But who knows now. Is it hot up on the surface?"

The woman was about to say something, but she was drowned out by a quaking roar from above, and then a series of blossoming explosions.

"Well, I guess that answers your question," Jar said.

"Okay," Parka said. "I hate this. We're going to miss Hallows Eve."

"Stop whining," Jar said. "The amulet is the important thing, remember? Priorities?"

"I wish I had more apples," Parka muttered, revving his motorcycle and easing into the detour that the woman directed him to. He meant to ask her about the walking sticks.

Parka and Jar's motorcycles climbed to the surface. The surface was full of bright light and wispy ash was in the air. The couriers were in the desert foothills. An Old Being was hunkered down, sprawling in the desert. Eagle-falcon drones—it was hard to tell what mercenary company they were attached to—swooped, bombed, and soared away from the Being. Parka and Jar stopped and assayed the narrow road ahead, and where the road stopped.

"Ugh," Parka said. "The Being's in the way."

"Yeah."

The Being ate mountains. Finishing those, the Being would move to the badlands and mesas. Sparks shot off its slimy, translucent fur as it swept its mammoth pseudopods across sheep farms and little casinos. There were kites on stiff strings protruding from its upper reaches. When the Beings landed on a planet and sucked out the nitrogen, galactic civilizations would follow. After a few years, the Beings would be full, and then calcify, leaving several seedling Beings in their wake, who would then transport themselves to new systems. And *then* the residue of the Being's wake could be properly and safely mined. This residue powered the vast interstellar transmutation ships. Until that time, there would be war around the perimeters of the Beings, dozens of mercenary guilds and free companies jostling for position.

"There's no way we can drive around it?" Jar asked.

"Too many gullies." Parka put on his telescopic sunglasses and squinted at the Being. "Well, it's possible to . . . no."

"What?" Jar said. "Tell me."

More ships screamed above them, fast-eagle merlins that carpetbombed a trench right in front of the Being. Prisms trailed in the bombs' wake. Counter-fire from the trench screamed upward.

"We'll jump over said Being," Parka said.

Jar started laughing so much that sulfur tears began streaming out of his ducts, splashing upon his upholstery. "Whither the ramp, friend, whither the ramp?"

"What, you can't do a wheelie?"

"No . . . I've—I've never tried."

"And where did you learn to ride again?"

Jar paused. "On the ship."

"Hell, no wonder. You have to learn on the surface. I learned in Tennessee, before its flattening. Everyone wheelied. Well, anyway, it's easy. You just have to utilize the booster with the correct timing. You want to practice?"

"No, I'll watch you first."

"Are you scared?"

"Yeah."

Parka leaned forward and put a claw on Jar's carapace. "Well, don't be. Okay, let me make my approach."

Parka put his motorcycle in reverse about a half a kilometer and considered his approach, licking his lips. Jar crossed his arms and looked back and forth from the Being to Parka. The Being began humming, with resonances of local accordion noises. Parka leaned forward, kicked his motorcycle on, and then he roared forward, shooting past Jar in an instant. Then Jar turned on his motorcycle as well, and revved, and soon enough was a few lengths behind Parka.

"No, Jar!" Parka shouted, looking behind him. But there was no way for Jar to hear him, both traveling at the speed of sound. The Being was before them. Through its diaphanous surface, Parka could see about a thousand humans, and also four hundred birds of various types, five herds of cattle, a parking lot of used cars, several giant tractors, many boulders/reprocessed mountains, broken casinos, and a few off-worlders who were too stupid to get out of the way.

Parka hunkered down and wheelied and hit the booster. He soared, gaining clearance by a few meters over the Being. There were white kites protruding from the gelatinous skin of the Being, the kites' strings puncturing the surface and spooled far below. The eagle-falcons' bombs had accidentally scarred the Being in many places, but they weren't able to break through the surface.

When the booster gave out, Parka held out his arms and leaned forward, just clearing the Being. He skidded to a halt and spun the motorcycle around, watching Jar.

Jar had accelerated too late, and he seemed to hang over the Being, suspended like one of the eagle-falcons.

Jar gave a thumbs-up sign.

Then one of the kites snapped to life and whipped at one of his legs, and the thread tangled around the limb. Jar careened forward and separated from his cycle, which slammed against the surface of the Being's skin—the booster still on—and ricocheted upward. With the booster still going at full capacity, the motorcycle slammed into the wings of one of the low-flying fast-eagle merlins that was overhead. The eagle merlin spiraled out of control and careened into the side of a mesa about ten kilometers away. Parka felt the backblast as he watched Jar try to pull at the kite, tearing at the ashy paper. But the thread held. He landed, almost gently, on top of

the Being. He tried to stand up, but in a few seconds he was beginning to sink into the Being.

"Jar!" Parka shouted. "Hang on!"

"Sorry," Jar shouted back, his legs already consumed. He looked down. "There's some serious alternate reality shit going on in there," he said.

"Keep fighting!" Parka said, but he knew it was hopeless.

Jar held up all of his arms and slid into the Being.

Parka hunched over his motorcycle, his head sinking between the handlebars. About a dozen walking sticks landed in his fur. He ran his claw over the hair, scooping them up and eating them. They tasted like Fritos.

"Nasty," he said, spitting them out.

He started riding again to Santa Fey in silence, with the shriek of the pre-mining operational maneuvers above him and to all sides. He put on his Toby Keith, but even this wouldn't soothe his guilt.

When he saw Santa Fey on the horizon, and the glow of the madrigal lights along the city walls, and the faint thrum of fiddles and cymbals and electric guitars, he became light-headed and also ridden with shame, which was far worse than guilt. He stopped his motorcycle and revved it, his gills fluttering.

At last he thought of Jar and also tried to consider what his life meant, in the end.

"Screw it," he said, and he turned around, back toward the Being.

About a kilometer away, Parka stopped and took the amulet out of the pouch. He knew, whatever happened, that his diplomatic career would be over. He would never be able to set foot in Santa Fey again, and they would in all likelihood hunt him down, if he lived. He would likely have to leave the planet he had grown fond of. Slowly, he slid the amulet around his neck. The walking sticks rose to the occasion, then. Soon there were thousands congregating around him, wedged in his joints and lining his shell. They felt warm and they tickled. The Being gurgled in the distance.

He remembered, with a sudden pang, what he had forgotten at the time—that the walking sticks were in his joints in much the same way during the kickboxing match.

A Camaro pulled up beside him, revving its engine. The boy, Sharon, was driving it; he was still covered in insects. Actually, Parka couldn't tell whether there was a boy there at all. Parka's own insects dropped off him and scurried up the car and through the open window to be with Sharon.

"Get in," insect boy said. His voice was deep and unwavering.

Parka turned off his motorcycle and parked it, and then got in the Camaro. He was nearly too tall for it, but he bent his head forward. He saw that the sandwich board was in the back seat.

"How did you get free of your post?" Parka said.

"Liberation takes many guises," Sharon said, revving the engine. "Enslavement is the pure heart of industry."

"Alrighty," Parka said.

Sharon turned toward him. "Therefore you shall be the Dwight D. Eisenhower of enlightenment and camaraderie."

The Camaro shot forward, and Parka fumbled for a seat belt. But there was none. They were driving right toward the Being. Parka was beginning to think this was a bad idea.

"I have an idea," Parka said. "How about we kickbox? If I win, you have to stop the car."

But the boy ignored him, and continued to accelerate. A few of the walking sticks from the boy scurried onto Parka's arm. He was too afraid to swat them away.

"Seriously," he said as much to himself as Sharon, "there has to be some underlying goddamn plan to this endeavor."

Sharon didn't turn as he said, "Not really. No."

They shot toward the Being, which soon was their entire horizon. The walking sticks were rattling with the velocity. The amulet was hot against his carapace. Parka closed his eyes.

In a blink of his outer eyelid, he expected one of three conclusions to his current predicament.

The first involved a high-impact collision against the outer husk of the Being, flattening him and the beautiful Camaro.

In the second, the Camaro would puncture the Being's skin and come to some kind of high-impact collision *inside* the Being, with any number of the farm animals, people, and other physical remnants of the aboriginal civilization surrounding him and either flaying him or welcoming him into a pathetic intra-Being community.

In the third, Sharon would halt at the last second, or dodge the Being somehow, because he was really trying to mess with Parka's head, which he was doing a spectacular job with already.

He missed home all of a sudden, the home he had tried so hard to forget, his twenty parents who all had contradictory advice for his well-being, and who hated interstellar travel—

"It won't be long," Sharon muttered, and then the Being was upon them, and they were upon the Being, and the Camaro screamed. It really screamed as it blew through the outer shell of the Being, causing an explosion in its wake and argent and vermillion sprays all around the car, and strands of Being fur flying. The front windshield shattered and the pieces blew away like tiny feathers. Then the top of the car ripped off.

They were inside the Being. But the Camaro didn't stop. In fact, it seemed to gain an extra level of speed once it was inside the Being. The walking sticks glowed like solar flares or brane-gun bullets from a galactic transmutator. Past the blue and green haze, Parka couldn't see much—shapes moving around that were vaguely aboriginal in form. The only things he could see clearly were the local sorcery-powered vehicles that were known as "monster trucks." They raced toward the Camaro, dozens of free-floating kites strung to their menacing hulls, but they were far too slow to reach the rocketing black Chevrolet stock car. The inside of the Being smelled like ferrous oxide, phlegm, sinew, and transdimensional energy. Before he was able to formulate the thought to look for Jar at all, the Camaro had burst through the other side of the Being with a roar. More fine, plush incandescent Being fur surrounded them. Then the light grew sharp and bright, and Parka shielded his eyes.

When he moved his pincer away from his face, he saw that the Camaro was sailing in the air above a deep canyon, which the Being was on the edge of.

"I want to warn you," Sharon said, "that you might want to brace yourself."

The Camaro seemed to be suspended above the dry riverbed far below for a few seconds, and slowly began to arc down. The other side of the gully seemed impossibly far away. The walking sticks, still glowing, began to thrum.

And then he touched the button on the center of the amulet, the one forbidden thing. The red rays embedded in the metal burst out, and solidified into strands many meters long, following the contours of his arms. Then they ballooned out like wings.

They were wings.

Without really thinking—and it might have been the amulet thinking for him—he stood up and stretched his arms out. The wings were massive, and the Camaro



wobbled but righted itself. As it fell, Parka could hear the Being on the other side of the canyon shrieking, and feel its reverberations around his neck.

Parka leaned forward and the Camaro landed right on the edge of the canyon with a thud. Sharon hit the brakes and the Camaro spun around. The Being was, in fact, in the throes of dying. Eagle-merlins from above were trying to maneuver out of the way, but aquamarine slime burst out of the Being like sulfuric geysers and coated the carpetbombers, which spun around and veered wildly. Parka could hear a high, sonorous call from many miles away—the continental emergency siren from Santa Fey.

Sharon was still. But then he pointed.

The Worm-Hare posse was there, gathered around a minivan, each with a brane gun strapped to its arm.

"You've *got* to be kidding," Parka said. He tried to get out of the car, but it was difficult because of his nascent wings. He ended up crawling forward through the glassless windshield and onto the hood. The wings settled around him like a reptilian cape.

"We want our damn car back," the prime Worm-Hare said. It was a different prime from the one Parka had defeated in kickboxing. The sliding door of the minivan was open, and Parka could see the original prime in the back of the minivan in a shimmering heal-sac. "To say nothing about the amulet, one of the key symbols of our people, which you've gone on and messed up as well. You know that your corporation is going to hunt you down for triggering 'dragon mode,' right?"

Parka laughed. *Dragon mode*. "That's great. Anyway, you seem to forget that I won the car fair and square. I don't know why you're so upset about that, considering your current sweet ride."

"We don't care," the prime said, hoisting his gun at Parka, ignoring the jab about the Honda Odyssey. "We just want a souvenir to take back with us off-world." He indicated the dying Being in the distance. "This planet is a cursed cesspool. There's nothing here anymore. But nothing would make us happier than to disintegrate your sorry carapace and take this car into orbit with us."

Parka spread his wide wings—which didn't hurt at all—because he thought it would scare them. But it didn't, at all. He sighed. He realized that sometimes it's the smallest moments that could change a creature's life. He had given the Camaro to a human as a prize, and had thought nothing of it. But here he was, about to die from the Worm-Hares after all, and with weird wings. But all the same, he felt good about his generosity, even if Jar wasn't there to share it with him.

With that in mind, he wasn't going to back down.

Sharon was motionless, but then he looked in the backseat and started laughing. It was such a quiet, tinny laugh that it shocked everyone into stillness.

"What?" the prime Worm-Hare said, exasperated. Then there was a red dot on his spiny forehead. Parka stared at it.

"Will someone *please* tell me what's going on?" the Worm-Hare said.

Then there was a whooshing sound, and a crossbow bolt hit the Worm-Hare's forehead where the red dot was. The bolt went through his head, blasting into the front windshield of the minivan. The prime slumped over.

Parka turned around. There was someone in the back seat.

"Hey," Jar said, sitting up, slinging a laser crossbow over his shoulder and looking groggy.

"Christ on a—" Parka said, but he stopped, because he didn't know what to say. Instead, he ran to Jar and wrapped his leathery, demonic wings around his friend in a familial embrace.

"Look at you," Jar said, still sleepily. "With wings and stuff."

"It's the amulet," Parka said. The remaining Worm-Hares were forgotten, but they had made their pathetic escape in the minivan. "But, anyway, priorities. How the hell did you get there? You weren't there all along, were you?"

Jar shrugged. "No, not really. I was in the Being and then . . . um, I don't remember much about that, but I saw this sweet Camaro cruising through, and then stop in front of me, and I said to myself, hey, maybe I should hop on board, so I did. And I must have picked up this crossbow. I guess I was on a shooting range for awhile or something?"

Parka had no recollection of the Camaro slowing down enough for anyone to jump aboard.

He disengaged from Jar. "I'm just glad you're safe."

"Well, you came back, friend. That's the important thing. I'd still be in there without you."

"The Tree requests your presences," Sharon said.

"What?" Jar said.

"Ah, the kid, he's like that," Parka said. He waved toward Sharon. "Okay, okay, the tree. But first, we need to get a beer."

Later that day Jack Nicklaus and Dwight D. Eisenhower and Sharon met for a summit over a few of the local beers.

"How's things?" Jack said.

"Super," Dwight said.

"Awesome," Jack said.

Sharon was silent. They were in a basement tavern somewhere north of Albuquerque, at a circular table. It was the off-season, and likely everyone in a 500-kilometer radius was trying to flee the potential blast zone of the Being, so they had the place to themselves. The beer was warm but the off-worlders didn't care. Sharon didn't order anything, so Parka had the bartender make him an Arnold Palmer. Toby Keith was playing on the speakers and everything was all right with the universe, at least for a few minutes.

"I'm going to miss Hallows Eve with the gang," Jar said. "But it's a small price to pay."

"Yeah, it would have been fun. I'm glad we dressed up anyway."

"You know, I wonder if Eisenhower would have won the war faster if he had wings like yours."

"It's very possible," Parka said. The amulet against his chest pulsed like his second heart. The walking sticks swirling around Sharon clicked and skittered.

"What do you want to do after we, er, look at some tree that might very well be imaginary?" Parka said.

"I don't know," Jar said, taking a sip of his Budweiser Light. "It's hard to say. Go back home, maybe. Start over with a new corporation. How about you?"

"Well, maybe I'll stay here," Parka said. "I haven't decided. But I like it here. I still have no idea what the hell happened."

"With the amulet?"

"A little. But mostly with the Camaro. And the Being."

"Ah, that's understandable," Jar said.

Parka leaned forward, which was awkward because of his wingspan. "What I want to know is . . . I might not never understand, ever, what's going on with these walking sticks. But they're trying to say something, trying to do something. They're trying to survive on this godforsaken planet we—I mean, not us personally, I mean the mining ventures—sucked dry for resource management. And for what? So we can get more fuel for our transmutators to find more planets to suck dry and destroy?"

Parka was melancholic, but not just for geopolitical reasons. He realized that this might be one of the last times of relative normalcy with his good friend.

"Yeah," Jar said. "You make a good point. Maybe I'll stay too. And learn how to properly ride a motorcycle and do a wheelie." He laughed and then downed his beer. "Come on, Sharon," he said. "Finish your drink."

They rode for an hour in silence through the empty desert, and could see the Tree from many kilometers away. A towering, shadowy shape. Sooner rather than later—Sharon wasn't exactly following a speed limit—they could see the enormity of the living structure. Parka stood up in the car, letting his body poke out of the shorn top, letting his wings free.

"Holy shit," Jar said.

The Tree was as tall as the highest peaks that the Being had desiccated, many kilometers high. And the Tree was on fire. Smokeless fire. The tree pulsed with orange light. The branches were leafless, but they spiraled in gargantuan yet intricate patterns.

About a thousand meters away, Sharon stopped the car. Everyone got out. The walking sticks encompassing Sharon, or perhaps embodying him, were glowing in syncopation with the Tree. Then it became clear that the Tree was made up of billions of the walking sticks.

There were many other abandoned vehicles all around the Tree in a ring.

"Why are the walking sticks doing this?" Jar whispered.

Parka shook his head but didn't say anything. He had no idea.

Sharon turned to the two of them and said, "We need you two, the Dwight D. Eisenhower and Jack Nicklaus of interpersonal diplomacy, to carry a message back to your people. You will relay terms for peace." Sharon began walking toward the Tree.

"Wait, Sharon," Parka said. "What will happen if we do?"

"What will happen if we don't?" Jar said.

Sharon paused for a second and said, "My name's not Sharon." Then he began walking toward the Tree again.

Parka watched him for a little while, and looked at Jar, who shrugged.

"Who the hell knows," Jar said.

As the general and the golfer followed Sharon to the base of the tree, Parka swore he heard Sharon, who wasn't in fact Sharon, humming a tune, one of Toby Keith's more recent songs about exile on the moon and earthly liberation. Or maybe it was only the sound of the walking sticks and the desolate wind making music together, which wasn't meant for a stranger like him, wasn't for him to understand. ○

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Felicity Shoulders lives in the wooded hills of Portland, Oregon, with a cat and a software engineer. Her story "Conditional Love," which appeared in the January 2010 issue of *Asimov's*, can be heard at Escape Pod. In her latest story for us, a couple of ambitious game designers try to figure out how to survive the cutthroat climb up the corporate ladder while trying to be saved from the . . .

# APOCALYPSE DAILY

Felicity Shoulders

"How shall I end the world today?" Katrina Vang asked the ceiling. The ceiling didn't respond, and her cat offered only a petulant mew.

"What kind of question is that to ask a poor dumb animal?" Natalie said from the doorway, and Katrina blinked to make sure she was actually awake. Right, her sister was supposed to be there. Sleeping on the couch due to a sudden lack of job and apartment.

"Traddles woke me up by sticking his paw in my eye socket. He owes me."

"Still, you can't ask the cat to do your job for you. End the world yourself." Natalie scooped up the tabby and scratched him over-vigorously beneath the chin.

Katrina put her feet on the floor and preemptively turned off the alarm clock. "Why are you already up at six? Even I'm not supposed to be up this early, and I'm employed."

"Not 'already' so much as 'still.' You can go back to sleep, I'll corral the cat."

"No, once I've started worrying about work it's all over." She shooed Natalie ahead of her and shuffled into the kitchen. "Stupid first anniversary is coming up. The Veeps That Be demand something 'spectacular.' Ideas due today, and we don't have any."

"World ending is old hat?"

"Pretty much. It's my job to make it new again. Or die in the attempt." The coffee-maker, programmed for eight AM brewing, sat empty. Its LEDs stared at Katrina until she woke up enough to push the button.

Coffee smell obtained—half the benefit, as far as she was concerned—Katrina slipper-slapped across the parquet floor of her apartment and sat at her computer. She should treat this time as a valuable gift and dream up an anniversary event that would render the Veeps stunned and sockless. Instead she started up *Apocalypse Daily*.

"You're playing games?" Natalie said.

"The game. Everyone at Endertainment's supposed to play at least twice a week."

"But you wrote all the challenges. Isn't it boring?"

"It's one thing to storyboard something and another to survive it. Besides, it's a good game. It's sociable."

"I think thin rationalizations are a sign of addiction," Natalie laughed and moseyed toward the kitchen.

"Half that coffee is mine, *mei mei*," Katrina called, and logged into the game.

Katrina's avatar, Wee Kat, woke up in *AD*. Kat lived in a place much like Katrina's, but bare and devoid of night-owl sisters and tabby cats. She could have told the game about Traddles, but she wasn't keen on carting a cat carrier with her through flood, fire, and zombie-pocalypse, or on leaving even a digital Traddles behind. As for the décor, Katrina had never seen any point to blinging up her home base. Sure, items like rugs and TVs were free to add, but that's because they were survival-neutral.

Every *Apocalypse Daily* day began the same way, since she didn't see fit to share any travel plans with Endertainment. Kat appeared in her apartment, the "life expectancy" and "health" bars at top left showing 100 years, 100 percent. Through the window, she saw that today was #285, Epic Flood. Not a good *AD* day to live in Seattle, but the water was only forty feet up from Lake Washington, glinting in overly regular patterns of charcoal and silver. Getting up early had given her a head start. Checking the friend list on her character's "phone," she saw that none of her local friends were online yet. She was on her own.

Kat ignored her earthquake kit (purchased with 400 Survivor Points) and picked up her hiking backpack (200 Survivor Points). She headed down the stairs and loaded her bike (1000 Survivor Points) from the lobby bike icon. Public transit was seldom reliable in an apocalypse.

Katrina set her virtual handlebars for the passenger ferry, since drowning in a train car didn't sound much better than drowning at home. By the time she got to the overpass and the slope down to the Sound, the water had already risen further. The ferry terminal rose out of murky ripples, and she wasn't sure Wee Kat would make it to the boat. She dropped her bike—it would be back at her building for tomorrow's adventure—and waded out to the doors. She had to do a drum solo on the "use" button before Wee Kat managed to pull the door open against the pressure of two feet of water. Her life expectancy ticked down to 98—the Environment department must have added a pollution algorithm—before she slopped out of the rendered water into the stairwell of the terminal, leaving footprints on the treads. The door swung wide in the current for the next player.

She ran along the hallway to the drowning pier. The ferry hadn't started its engines yet, so she had time to swim out to the gangway with the slow but preternaturally even doggy-paddle of the *AD* character. Katrina was an experienced swimmer, and if she had cared to, she could have proven it to the company and gotten Wee Kat several points of swimming skill. Since she knew Endertainment made almost as much money off information sales as subscriptions, she forbore. Importing friends-lists from other networks was as far as she'd go.

Wee Kat made it to the ferry and sat shivering rhythmically next to a napping character. Ninety-four years life expectancy and full health, she noted smugly, and logged out in the glow of a safe-save symbol. Her character would be secure here for at least four hours.

Back to real life, and the troubling question of what *Apocalypse Daily* could do that they hadn't before. Katrina shampooed her hair thinking about zombies, which they'd done for the six-month, and pulled on a sweatshirt considering the possibility of intra-plate earthquakes.

Natalie was eating the last banana and Katrina looked her over: unconvincing blond highlights that stopped a few inches from the root, dark circles. "Honey, shouldn't you get some sleep?"

"I'll sleep when I need it. If I wanted to be nagged, I'd have stayed with Mama and Baba."

Katrina suppressed an indignant sound. Her salary would, barely, cover Natalie. It was tempting to point out that her parents' retirement would not and Natalie was selfish to even consider it, but Katrina decided to go for a smaller caliber response. "All I'm saying is I wouldn't hire you right now. You look like the undead."

"You guys are hiring?"

"Ugh, no. The word is cuts, big cuts. They're just holding off for the anniversary, hoping to have a big subscription bump to counteract the bad PR from layoffs." She stuck her head into the refrigerator, scanning shelf after shelf of disappointment and decay. She settled for a yogurt, plopped into her desk chair, and spun it to face Natalie at the kitchen table. "I could be out on my ass in two months."

"But you've been there since they were a li'l baby startup. You're the senior whatever!"

"Yeah, so if the disasters get stale, all the responsibility's mine. Besides, there's Emil."

"What's that?"

"One of my teammates. Ever since they decided one of us should be Senior and I got anointed, I feel like he's got crosshairs on my back."

"What's he do?"

"Little stuff. Like when I *do* have a good idea, after I present it to Lee, Emil chimes in with an extra flourish or detail or addition, and somehow Lee ends up thanking him for the whole thing."

"Dude, do it back to him." Natalie wiped her mouth and started doing yoga in the middle of the kitchen. Warrior Pose.

"One of us needs an idea before the other can try to steal credit."

"Well, figure something out," Natalie said, dropping her arms. "I can tell you firsthand, the last thing you want is a boss who thinks he has 'grounds for termination.' Once the bastards have an excuse, you're savings waiting to happen."

Time for work. Katrina shooed Natalie into the bedroom and logged back into AD—she could leave Wee Kat sitting in the ferry while she worked, jiggle the mouse occasionally to accrue Survivor Points.

Collaboration Space tinkled an alert as a team member logged on. *Morning. Any ideas for the big day?* Sara's message appeared, and Katrina paged back to Collaboration Space.

*Not yet. You?* she typed back.

*Acid rainstorms?*

*Not a big enough spectacle, but we'll put it on the dev list.*

*Yellowstone supervolcano?*

*I wrote that already. It was released Friday the 13th as a gimmick, remember? Back in May.*

*Oh, I should have remembered. I played that. Well, there's always nuclear war.*

Sara . . . Katrina sighed and looked at the time. Emil would be logging on any moment now, twenty minutes late, so she had better brush her hair. Sara always developed a need for video contact as soon as Emil was online.

*Didn't you tell me at orientation that users like similar scenarios? Like a do-over.*

Emil logged on as Katrina typed, *This is the one-year anniversary. It can't be the same old thing with better graphics.*

A message from Emil appeared: *Hey Sara, hey boss. Looks like I didn't miss much! :) Katrina snarled at the monitors as she finished looping up her hair. Do YOU have any ideas?*

*Zombies,* Emil sent.

*Done three ways.*

*Werewolves.*



*How do you make it a world crisis rather than an individual crisis?*

*Lycanpropic epidemic! You're not supposed to be critical during brainstorming, you know.*

Katrina decided not to correct his spelling. *Yeah. We just pushed ourselves so hard to get the breathing room that now breathing is all I feel up to doing.*

There was a pause before Emil typed, *Still breathing = still collecting Survivor Points :p*

"Still breathing." Katrina drummed her fingers as the inevitable videoconference request appeared. She accepted without closing her mouth and was surprised to see how vapid she looked onscreen. "Breathing . . . global oxygen loss? Bit boring, low adventure potential," she mused aloud. "And where would it go, anyway? Solar winds? Siphoned off by aliens?"

Aliens. There was an idea. She fought reluctance to share any idea with Emil, then forced herself to say it: "We could do an alien invasion."

Sara's turn to look blank. "We've never done that?"

"Technically, we have, but it was just a narrative excuse to flood the world with low-lying nerve gas. We didn't do anything with the aliens."

Emil's Byronic features crinkled into a pout. "You said a repeat was out."

"It's barely a repeat. Remember way back in the first quarter—oh, sorry, you weren't there. Tasha wanted to do War of the Worlds and the mob designers said they didn't have the resources for tripods. We took that as a guideline and didn't do any invasions."

"The Sino-Canadian Expeditionary—" Sara started.

"No alien invasions. One of those will be a bang big enough for the veep brigade." She opened a project file and started a list of ideas.

A few hours later, Emil and Sara were having a debate over the relative merits of *Alien & Aliens*. Flirt-fighting. Well, Emil was extremely handsome, if you didn't notice how much higher his left eye was than his right. Sara had only been on the team a few months, so the sexual tension hadn't staled yet.

Katrina left them bickering on her left-hand monitor and stirred Wee Kat on her right. Wee Kat had entered the "survivor stare" mode characters took before they logged themselves off for inactivity. Now she stretched, and Katrina toured the boat.

Groups of survivors nodded and conversed in a canned mutter. Some, like the schlubby white guy Kat had been sitting next to, napped on the long benches. Unless they wore boat uniforms, these could be players or computer-run, no way to tell. The view swayed as ocean-sized waves crossed the Sound.

Katrina checked the "phone" interface—several of her friends were online and alive, including five Seattleites. She sent Esteban, *Status?*

*I'm in the Space Needle. Helluva view!*

*I'm on the Vashon Island Ferry.*

*Smart. How high is this water going to get?*

*I can't narc.*

*If my feet get wet, steam over and pick me up.*

Roger. She closed the chat and imagined roping the ferry to the Space Needle and landing, after the flood receded, on the chaotic slopes of the Experience Music Project. Everything in *AD* had compressive and tensile strengths, a full array of properties. That roof would probably buckle. There were no day-afters in *AD*, though. No follow-through and no aftermath.

She climbed up to the bridge and peered in at the computer's crew at the wheel. "Where are you going?" she said, one of the canned questions to which most computer characters would respond.

The man replied, "I don't know," through the glass but unrealistically loud. Good glitch to remember in case she felt like hassling some world-builders.

Her friend Marcia's name flashed red on the list—she was issuing a distress call. *In sailboat on Puget Sound*, the attached message ran. *Taking on water.*

Send GPS coords? Katrina sent, and soon she was using one of the other recognized phrases, "Please! You must help save my friend!" to get the ferry aimed toward Marcia. Marcia's character doggy-paddled from the swamped little boat over to the ferry.

"Thank god, Kat, I couldn't get that thing to go anywhere and the waves were so big!" Marcia chatted as their characters clasped hands and the message *You have created a group! There are 2 friends in your group* appeared. Marcia had sat next to Katrina in high school Orchestra, and they had barely talked since, but any friend counted for AD's purposes. The more friends you had, the better.

"You're so smart. Did you design the boat? Is that how you knew?" Kat led her inside and formulated a diplomatic response. At least she got extra Survivor Points for grouping.

"Do you think the two of us should have an *Alien* marathon and see who's right?" she heard Sara say, and typed a hurried farewell to Marcia. She returned to Collaboration Space, observed Sara's smugness and Emil's smooth lack of expression. She felt her shoulders tense up just looking at him.

"Let's get back on task, people," she said, feeling more mendacious than managerial. "We have a progress meeting with Lee in a few hours, so let's get this invasion underway."

Natalie had the good grace to fall asleep—in Katrina's bed—before the team had to present their initial ideas to their supervisor. Lee was high enough up he knew more than one veep by first name, so his opinion mattered. He liked the invasion. He nodded as he scrolled through the storyboards Katrina had drawn of the invasion ships, the tank-like harvesters, and so forth. She'd even made a few ad mockups: *Apocalypse Daily* avatars cowering as a spaceship's shadow fell over them. Iconic, but not specific.

"Brass will love this," Lee said. "It's flashy, it's scary, it's a little camp."

Emil cleared his throat. "There's another idea I had, sir. To make this event really new."

Lee's eyebrows rose, in sync with Katrina's and Sara's. *What's he talking about?* Sara messaged. Katrina was too busy typing a similar message to Emil to respond.

Emil's eyes twitched as the question arrived but he continued speaking. "The aliens are harvesting humans. Why not have them recruit some of us to help in the effort?"

"Backstabbing?" Lee said.

"It's a radical idea, of course," Katrina said, frowning at the zone of her screen occupied by Emil. "Since this is a *social* game based on ties of *friendship*."

"At the end of the day, it's only a game, right? Who's going to mind a little competitive spirit?"

*Certainly not a shark like you*, Katrina thought.

Lee tilted back in his Aeron chair, swilling the idea around like a mouthful of twelve-year-old Scotch.

"Of course, the company doesn't want to do anything that might decrease social involvement, since the game and the monetized datastream are dependent on recommendations and friend-invites," Katrina said, packing in as many magic money words as she could think up.

"Yes, yes. I'll let Brian and Krystal—the veeps—"decide, but it's an intriguing idea. Innovative. Game-changing."

Katrina took a deep breath and leaned forward. "In that case, let's add an element of scavenger hunt to this. The aliens want us to betray each other to the harvesters—say, bundle or tag each other for pick-up—so they send devices down, rain them all

over the surface. You have to find one in order to have a chance to sell out your fellow players."

Lee nodded. "Excellent work. Really stellar thinking from you and your team, Katrina!" He disconnected.

Katrina let out her breath. That sounded like she'd won. "Emil," she said as casually as possible, "I know you love brainstorming, but in the future let's talk about ideas as a group before pitching them to Lee."

Emil nodded. That was all she was going to get.

Sure enough, just before quitting time she got an email from Lee, cc'ing her team and Brian and Krystal. They were so excited about the fresh new ideas. Green light for the A-day invasion!

Sara sent another video request, but Katrina closed it. *It's six, Sara. We can start tomorrow.* She sat back and wondered how many Survivor Points she'd get for today. Maybe six hours of online survival so far, for sixty; fifty bonus if she managed to live the day out. Fifteen for the three hours she'd spent online grouped with Marcia.

Natalie padded out of the bedroom, surveyed the fridge. "What's for dinner?"

"Maybe you could be the one in charge of that, at least while I've still got a job?"

"Meeting went that well, huh."

"I tried your backstab-the-backstabber thing. I feel dirty."

"As long as you feel employed." Natalie examined a block of cheddar and shrugged. "Why's Entertainment looking to downsize anyway?"

"It's bad all over, right?"

"Sure, but I'd think the more people are out of work, the more people are enjoying the vicarious simplicity of running from tidal waves and pets with super-rabies."

"Beats our real problems, that's for sure."

A-day minus two, and Natalie's snores woke Katrina. She stared at her ceiling, one corner decorated with a landscape in gray cobweb. "Fine," she growled, and walked out to her workstation. A-day was out of her hands now, hurtling toward her for good or ill. But she could always use more ideas, both serious pitches and backup for the days when Lee just didn't like a thing. She checked a few paranoid blogs and fringe science fora, saved some links, and settled in to doodle out ideas. Even her non-work doodles tended toward fleeing and carnage now.

This time, the cartoon figures were fleeing a giant firestorm. Katrina was coloring the flames in the sky when a chime startled her: Sara logging in to Collabora-tion Space. Natalie grunted and rolled over, her snoring mercifully ceasing.

*What are you doing on this early, boss?* Sara messaged.

*Couldn't get back to sleep. What about you?*

*Oh, this is my most productive time of day! Sometimes I use it to work on my own projects, but today I felt like adding to the scenario files.*

Katrina felt she should say something laudatory about this behavior, but she didn't feel up to it in an oversized sea otter T-shirt at 5:20.

*I'm kinda glad to catch you alone, anyway,* Sara continued. *I'd gotten the impression you didn't think I should be going after Emil? You were so right.*

Katrina realized she might not be as subtle as she'd always hoped. *Oh?*

*I went to his apartment for that movie marathon thing. Maybe it wasn't a great idea to trap myself for hours on a first date, you know? He talks about nothing but himself. Blah blah, I hacked the school file server, I dated the prettiest girl, I decided not to be a musician because it wasn't sufficiently intellectual.*

Katrina wondered why Sara was telling her this. They'd never been anything like close, but maybe Sara was a different person at five AM.

*You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this stuff, but I had sort of a*

question. I tried to say something about the game when there was a break in the Emil saga, and he told me he never plays it. He pays some kid to play it under his name! Isn't that like, bad? I mean, it's a requirement, and also it's an employee account, right?

It's not exactly a security threat. It just means the character gets some free swag occasionally and doesn't get charged subscription fees.

Oh. I thought maybe . . .

He might have been lying, anyway, Sara. He seems like the kind of guy who'd want to be seen as gaming the system, and from what you're saying, he was being pretty self-aggrandizing.

I guess you're right. He went on about his collection of visitor badges, too.

?

Like, he'd had an interview at Google once, so he still had the visitor badge, up on a bulletin board with a bunch of others. He had like five from Zone Red.

How recent?

How would I know that?

They changed their logo. Was it the red Z or the bomb thing?

Oh. Bomb. On the top one, bomb. Does that mean something?

Not really. Don't worry about whether he's playing the game or not, I'll figure out what to do.

Okay. I can't believe I'll have to talk to him again in a few hours, you know? He's such a douche. And have you noticed one of his eyes is higher than the other?

Katrina wasn't sure how to answer that and maintain her managerial detachment, so she begged off. I'm going to get breakfast. She saved her sketches and signed out of Collaboration Space. Natalie's blanket had fallen off of the futon, and she put it back. She'd get dressed and bike down the way for donuts before Natalie woke up, surprise her.

The street was almost empty—a man mumbling in a doorway, a convenience store clerk stealing a smoke with the door propped—and even with the cold air all around her and the scent of someone's woodstove in her nose, it reminded her of *Apocalypse Daily*. She smirked as she pedaled the same direction she had on several of those more perilous occasions. Maybe Natalie was right, and she spent too much time on the game: work time, playtime, brain cycles. But if the alternative was losing her job, moving back into the bunk beds at Baba and Mama's house and starting a visitor badge collection of her own, she'd stick with monomania.

She almost passed the donut shop, which had moved a few doors up since the Google Streetview data that AD used. She chained her bike and ducked inside the steaming shop to face the small, bleary woman on duty. "Two glazed, two maple, a jelly, and a Bavarian cream, please." The woman's movements were precise, effort completely minimized.

This was something Baba had done sometimes when they were kids: had donuts waiting when they woke up, before he went off to work at Boeing. She hadn't remembered until she started ticking off Natalie's favorites and realized how she knew them. She wondered about Baba's work, if it helped to get up every day and feel you were part of something important, something lives depended on. Katrina folded a bill into the tip jar and stepped back into the morning chill with her box of calories. Any job was important if it was all you had.

On the day of the launch, she woke to Traddles purring on her chest, which went a little way toward calming her anxiety. She hadn't exactly dreamed pitchfork mobs yelling "You ruined *Apocalypse Daily*!" but having to speed-dissect a live frog for a class she didn't remember registering for was close enough. She still felt guilty, as if allowing millions of users to betray each other was itself a betrayal.

She logged on and watched the cut-scene the video department had put together: a huge spaceship like a raft of soap bubbles approaching Earth and breaking into its composite spheres in high orbit. The smallest balls fell bright through the atmosphere and landed, tearing into roads and houses. The charred shell of one melted off, leaving a great tread-bottomed machine, shiny violet. As big as a tank, but not a reused tank model: the company had gone all out, after all. It had a dilating maw and a huge antenna, and looked flatteringly like one of her sketches.

Natalie sat up on the futon couch. "Good morning, sunsh—"

"Hush up, this is the anniversary event."

"I'll get popcorn," she said, without showing any signs of doing so.

A face appeared on Katrina's screen, fuchsia in color and shaped like a shallow bowl. "I am Senior Commander Frit of the Apok Cooperative. Our harvesters have been distributed across your landmasses to collect humans for enslavement. To facilitate the process, incentives will be offered to cooperative humans!" A tentacle raised a poison-green object, between a grout-gun and a hypodermic. Katrina's idea. "Please use any one of these devices to inject your fellow humans with a microtransmitter, tagging them for retrieval by a harvester. Your DNA will be noted, and your freedom assured when you have tagged ten humans! Harvesters will of course make allowances for those *actively* involved in assisting our efforts. Good luck, humans!"

The cut scene ended and Wee Kat was left standing in her apartment, facing the window and a view of the house across the street, caved in by a harvester landing. The machine was stirring in its bed of rubble, so Wee Kat grabbed her backpack and shiny new gun (500 Survivor Points).

"Are you planning on shooting one of those purple mech things with *that*?" Natalie said around a mouthful of granola.

"Everything in AD is breakable."

The phone interface buzzed and showed a message from Marcia. *What the hell? This is the screwiest thing you guys have come up with, Kat. Is it for real?*

Katrina wasn't sure how to answer that. *As real as the ice age yesterday*, she typed, and headed out of her building the back way.

There was a skip as she biked along, a couple of laggy moments. Was it the harvesters hogging processor, or was it the network—more players online than usual? She saw half a dozen people running along the street, away from the harvester she'd seen. Probably computer players, since they were running almost directly toward another smoke plume, another harvester. She saw another human pausing on a corner, looking around with purpose, and she skidded into an areaway. She wasn't used to seeing other survivors as a threat. Sure, there were grievers, but not all that many. Grievers couldn't get help from friends, lost Survivor Points if they killed people, wasted valuable time stealing vehicles and overpowering computer-run functionaries. Now everyone was a griever.

She pedaled slowly between the houses, listening for harvester engines or human footsteps. Then she braked, the bike wheels gliding in place for an unconvincing second. In a circular scorch mark in the pavement sat a green grout-gun.

"Score!" Natalie said. "Lucky you."

"Ugh. I don't want it."

"What are you talking about? You said it was your idea."

"My stupid one-upping idea. I don't want to play the game that way."

"Take it up to Bellevue and tag Mr. Emil. Or one of your bastard bosses."

"Yeah, right."

"Well, if you don't take it, someone else will."

Katrina saw her point. She hit the "use" button and it disappeared into her inventory.

"You could tag computer players. They're still human, right? No one gets hurt."

"I don't like to meta-game."

"What does that mean?"

"I try to pretend they're real boys and girls, just like me."

The "phone" buzzed. Cousin Lydia. *Katrina? We're at Union & MLK if you want to join up.*

*Who is?*

*Me & Andrew & my bandmates. You met them all during the snowpocalypse, remember?* After a pause, she typed, *Guess it's not the more the merrier anymore. Come if you want. We're going to get out of town fast, head east. We've got 2 cars & a van.*

"She seems pissy," Natalie said.

"Yeah. I'll go. It's not worth upsetting friends over a game, let alone family." Maybe getting over the suspicion was the worthwhile part of this whole fiasco.

She avoided human contact on her way to Union and MLK. The intersection was empty, and there were only a few cars in the grocery store lot—no one stocking up this time. She coasted to a halt next to a bus shelter and looked at the intersection. Something seemed wrong.

"Look out!" Natalie yelled, and flailed a pointing finger into her field of vision. A human figure had emerged from behind the graffitied shelter, tagger shining bright against his dull brown clothes. She burst away, put fifty feet between them. If she'd been on foot, she'd be finished. She turned her handlebars back to survey him. He was very nondescript—no special T-shirts or other player bling—easy to mistake for one of the computer characters. Since she'd paused, he started toward her again. Katrina switched out her bike for the gun and the other player changed direction inhumanly fast and ran up a driveway.

"Aww, you could have made him dance," said Natalie.

The *Jurassic Park* thoom-thoom of a harvester sucking humans into its portal maw sounded from the left speaker, but it was still a ways off. Katrina put away the gun to pedal back to the rendezvous and ditched her bike by the parked Vanagon (3000 Survivor Points).

"Where're the other cars?" Natalie asked.

Katrina shrugged, hit the "use" button on the side door and typed "Who paid for this?" as her character maneuvered inside.

"Lydia!" Natalie squeaked.

Their cousin's avatar zoomed out of the darkness, her grout-gun gleaming.

*You've been tagged for alien harvesting by Lydia Vang-Richards. Harvester ETA: 01:42,* Kat's screen flashed.

Lydia froze as she typed. "It's my drummer's! He plays this game as much as you do."

"Shoot her, *jie jie!* Come on, before the aliens get you!" Natalie said.

Katrina brought up her item wheel, spinning for the gun, but she saw her own bright green tagger first. "Look, she's typing. Monologuing is always the villain's downfall, right?" Lydia didn't move as Kat brought the tagger up and pressed "use."

"You bitch! OMG!" Lydia chatted instead of whatever she'd been planning to say. 01:16, Kat's harvester countdown said. Lydia's avatar walked to the front seat and the van started up.

"You're the one who tagged your own husband and stole your friend's van," Katrina said.

"See if we go to Thanksgiving at their house this year," Natalie grumbled.

"Why would she do that, you think?"

Natalie flopped back on the futon. "Are you kidding? Andrew makes like five times as much as her. Why wouldn't she want to sell his ass for parts every once in a while?"



Katrina looked at her cousin's avatar on the screen, the view through the windshield beyond shifting erratically. She didn't see the point of running away from the harvester to gain a paltry few minutes' survival, but Lydia had not consulted her. She flipped over to search real-time comment and see how the invasion was going over.

*My MOM just sold me to the aliens.*

*Ha ha, I got 8 tags already! Run bitches run*

*This is such bullshit, I only got 3 minutes today.*

*I for one welcome our alien overlords. #10tags*

She flipped back to the game in time to see the glowing purple maw of the harvester engulf Wee Kat in the wreckage of the van, and the jagged static image as she was beamed up to the alien mothership via antenna. *You have died. You have been awarded [12 Survivor Points] for your [1.2] hours of successful active play. You grouped with 0 other survivors, for 0 Teamwork Survivor Points. Log back in tomorrow to spend your points and try to escape another Armageddon!*

She quit and stared at the comment updates scrolling.

*Can other ppl tell if I have a tag gun in inv?*

*I gotta log on & tag my ex-gf it'll be sweeeeeet*

"Too soon to tell how the wind is blowing," Katrina said, and Traddles yawned.

"Blowing pretty hard," Natalie said, and turned on the TV.

The phone rang at eight AM the next morning. "Congratulations, Ms. Vang!"

"Uh, thanks."

"Did I wake you? Norbert Jenkins." The Veep of Operations, commonly known as Big Veep.

"Not at all, Mr. Jenkins. But I'm still, uh, making my coffee. I haven't been to my computer. Why am I being congratulated?"

"We had a record sign-up day yesterday! Five hundred thousand! Two hundred K in just two hours!"

"I'm reluctant to take credit, Mr. Jenkins—there was a huge marketing push accompanying A-day and—"

"No marketing like viral marketing. Everyone wants to see who will backstab who, whether they can sell their friends out before they get sold out. If they can resist temptation! Now, I know this is jumping the chain of command, but what have you got for this week?"

"Today's acid storms, and then we did airborne Ebola—"

"Hmm. I see. Carry on. And remember, Ms. Vang, A-day is what people like! Numbers don't lie."

"This game isn't just about survival, though, it's about, umm, the human spirit."

"Nonsense. It's about the bottom line. Don't you want your stock to split?"

"Of course, Mr. Jenkins. Thank you for calling."

"Keep up the good work."

Katrina listened to Natalie sing Norah Jones songs in the shower. Meeting with Lee in ninety minutes. She stared at the paintings on the walls, relics of her art degree. Maybe someone like Emil would be a better fit for the new *Apocalypse Daily*, a backbiter to plan the backstabbing game. An infantile thought, maybe. A real adult wouldn't sit here sulking because her favorite game is changing. Of course, a real adult would have a better resume, and some money saved. Katrina got out her tablet and started storyboarding.

The subscription graph was impressive, but Katrina didn't dare pause to let it sink in, for fear of Emil speaking up. "I think we need to leverage this success, Lee, starting with more player vs. player scenarios. Vampires vs. Werewolves, a combination plague and civil war story, would see 5 percent of the players wake up as vampires

and 5 percent as werewolves, each tasked with infecting normal humans and killing each other. In the Solar Flare scenario, only given areas on the globe would be free from dangerous radiation, inciting groups to fight each other for possession of the safe zones. You'll see I've sent you several more ideas. I suggest we intersperse these events with more traditional disaster gameplay in order to hold onto our base of longstanding players, aiming for at least one player vs. player event per week."

Lee blinked. "This is all excellent. I was only expecting to touch base on yesterday's event! Beautiful work, Katrina. Anything else, team?"

Sara seldom talked to managers. Emil was looking pole-axed. He opened his mouth a few times like a fish. "Well, the game is primarily social, sir, so perhaps—"

"The game's primarily about making money, Emil," Katrina cut him off. "If we can avoid losing the happy-fuzzy players while adding in the new PVP contingent, the company has a broader base: more fees and more user data to sell."

"All right then! Back to work, everyone. Let's end the world in style!" Lee added, "Katrina, hold on a second."

Sara popped off the screen, then, after a full ten seconds, the frowning Emil. Lee's golf-tanned face filled the monitor. "Great initiative, Katrina. It's so gratifying to see you grow into your role as team leader."

This felt a little condescending, given that Katrina's employee number was several hundreds lower than Lee's, but she smiled anyway. "Thank you, Lee. I'm glad to justify your confidence."

"You really showed leadership in there today."

Katrina liked "in there," such a strange, football-coach thing to say about a meeting that had happened nowhere at all.

"Anyway, keep up the good work!"

"Uh, Lee! Wait. Actually, there's something I wanted to bring to your attention. Since I'm the head of the team."

"Of course. My door's always open."

"It's Emil. He showed a lot of early promise, but—" she summoned the words. "He's not a team player and he's not pulling his weight. I fear he has no commitment to the game or to Endertainment—it's come—" she realized she'd already said "to your attention" and coughed. "I've found out he has been paying someone else to play *AD* for him, and is aggressively pursuing employment at Zone Red. If he's willing to lie to us about playing the game, how can we trust—"

"Understood. I'll be sure to consider that going forward."

He looked so serious Katrina was sure she'd misstepped, but the smile returned unchanged. "Congratulations again on the success of your—our—A-Day idea! Brave new world we're making!"

"Thank you, Lee."

Katrina exited out of the videoconference, and noticed Natalie watching, face pale. She'd apparently been dying her hair back to uniform black, and the dye had left bluish streaks on her pajama top.

"You're trying to get that guy fired?"

"I don't know that'll happen. I just passed on some information—"

Natalie rolled her eyes.

"You know how it was! You told me to fight back yourself."

"Sure, to save your own job!"

"Emil was gunning for me. What would you have done?"

"I'm not a boss, so who cares what I think?" Natalie shrugged.

"I'm not a boss either."

Natalie turned toward the hallway. "Whatever. You've learned how to play the game."

"I guess so," said Katrina. "Turns out it's just about survival." ○

# NEXT ISSUE

## JULY ISSUE

July is an issue full of firsts. A novelette from famed *Dr. Who* television writer and Hugo-fiction-finalist **Paul Cornell** marks his first appearance in *Asimov's*. "The Copenhagen Interpretation" warps time and space and history in a thrilling tale of espionage and life and death gambits that would leave James Bond gasping for breath. Masterful fantasy author **Theodora Goss** makes her inaugural visit to *Asimov's* with an SF tale about "Pug" and a group of Victorian-era girls who all have a very special ability.

## ALSO IN JULY

This issue also introduces two other new authors to our pages. YA author **Leah Cypess** looks at the trouble high-tech interference with gestation can wreak on "Twelvers" and brand-new writer **Josh Roseman's** caravan of desperate survivors hopes to "Bring on the Rain" before they are waylaid by dangerous competitors. Of course, not every July contributor is new to the magazine. Long-time book reviewer **Norman Spinrad's** short story listens to "The Music of the Sphere"; perennial *Asimov's* favorite **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** seeks to uncover the truth about "Dunyon"; Hugo-Award finalist **Bruce McAllister** heeds "The Messenger"; and the talented **Chris Beckett** terrifies us with a tale about what might happen on "Day 29."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column allows us to journey along on "The Fantastic Voyages of Sir John Mandeville"; **Paul DiFilippo** contributes "On Books"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at newsstands on May 10, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle, *Barnes and Noble.com's* Nook, and *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Robert Silverberg**, **Eleanor Arnason**, **Ken Liu**, **Kit Reed**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Michael Swanwick**, **Melanie Tem**, **Lisa Goldstein**, **Robert Reed**, **Neal Barrett, Jr.**, **Will Ludwigsen**, **Carol Emshwiller**, and many others!

# THE FIGHTER

Colin P. Davies

Since his last story for us, "The Certainty Principle" in the February 2009 issue, Colin's tales have appeared in *Jupiter Magazine*, *Membrane SF*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Time in a Bottle*, and *The Immersion Book of SF*. Much of his time lately has been devoted to the third five-part serial in his comic fantasy Pestworld series for *Beam Me Up! Podcast*. Details can be found on his website [www.colinpdavies.com](http://www.colinpdavies.com). With "The Fighter" Colin returns to the short-short territory of "The Defenders" (October/November 2004) and "Babel 3000" (March 2007) and examines the future of genetics and entertainment.

By the time Dominick saw the police car in his mirror it was already too late. Controls were overridden and his car slowed to a halt. Headlamps lit up the interior, so that he felt he was in the ring again, in the floodlights, fighting. He tugged at his seatbelt. His gloved fingers struggled to find the button and he bashed it with his fist.

The radio switched itself on and a voice addressed him: *Please get out of the car.*

"I'm trying to. . . ." He threw off the belt, pushed the door high, and squeezed out from behind the wheel. Icy evening air soothed the fresh wounds on his bare arms. Sweat dripped from his thick eyebrows and he had the taste of blood in his mouth. Hecklers, poker, groupies . . . and now this!

*Step away from the car.*

Dominick moved onto the crisp grass verge and out of the glare of the headlamps. Up on the overpass, the hiss of tires from cruising cars was a constant rhythm; like the dojo's drum, like the burn of repetition, *ichi, ni, san, shi*. . . Pain had a beat, and he could feel it now, chiseling at his ribs.

Only three strides behind Dominick, a low wooden fence offered escape into the dark refuge of a swamp. He could run—but what was the point? Muddy shoes and an inflated fine. Besides, it wasn't the money that made him angry. It wasn't even the knowledge that he was about to suffer the condescension of a matchstick man that made him angry.

It was *everything*.

Two figures, a male and female, climbed from the police car. After a brief scan of their surroundings, the officers approached. Their breath clouded, illuminated by the orange light from the overpass.

"Was I speeding?" Dominick asked. "I've just come off the freeway. Should've slowed down. I need to get home to my family, so just give me the ticket."

The policeman shook his head. "You weren't speeding."

Dominick thought back over tonight's fight. Had he gone wrong, slipped up, pushed the limits of the law? He tried to fight clean, but he was only human.

Flecks of snow settled on the officers' black uniforms.

The policeman edged out to the side, at a distance, while the younger female officer held up a small box—a scanner—and linked wirelessly to the chip in Dominick's head.

"Looking for something in particular?" Dominick attempted to keep the frustration from his voice; his last roadside meeting with the law had left a policeman dead.

"Just ID," said the thin woman. "Hardly needed, but . . . regulations." She was listening on a headset. "*Dominick* of Marsham Entertainment Industries. Ring name, *Grizzly*. Longest surviving fighter in the League." The woman's lips lifted just enough to register disapproval. "That means you've killed more times than anyone else."

Dominick glanced at the smears of blood on his white T-shirt. "You don't like fighting?"

"It's legal."

"That's not what I asked." Dominick wiped sweat from his bald scalp. The officer flinched and dropped a hand to her sidearm. "I like it," he told her.

"You don't get a choice."

He did not need this! The night had been bad enough already, with Eagle taking chunks out of his arms and then the dizzying crack on his head. He just wanted to get to his white mansion on the cliff-top at Heavenly Hills. Every three days without fail he would make sure he went home. Linda expected it—she *demand*ed it. She would be waiting for him now, standing at the balcony, sipping Chardonnay, watching snow drift in over the ocean, while tiny twins Gemma and Jane played in the games suite. He smiled; he felt sorry for these officers with their little lives and tepid loves. They could only imagine his life as a Hero.

"Do it, Higgs!" said the policeman.

"I'm not a killer." Officer Higgs clipped the scanner onto her belt. "It doesn't come easy for me."

"So what now?"

"Negotiation."

"And what if it goes badly?" He unfastened the strap on his holster.

"Then it goes badly for *us*. Everything comes down to value . . . and *he* has more."

Dominick was confused by the exchange. He reached slowly inside the pocket of his plaid trousers. "I fight in the Heroes League." With gloved fingers, he took out a creased photograph that showed him in his gladiatorial armor.

"You don't have to prove it." The policewoman took a glance at the picture. "Your muscles speak for themselves."

He was used to being admired, especially by women. It went with the role. But Linda knew he was more than just three hundred pounds of born and bred fighting machine. She said he had the touch of a butterfly and the heart of a dreamer.

That dead cop had called him a prize bull.

Officer Higgs stepped within striking range. "You need to come with us."

"Definitely not." He glared down at her.

If she was intimidated, she didn't show it. "It's not a request. We have authority from the League."

"Not now! I have to go home."

The policeman shook his head. "You don't have . . ."

"Mitchell!" the woman cut off her partner. "Dominick . . . you don't need to go home right now."

Dominick became aware of the scent of mud from the nearby swamp—a foul smell, and yet more vivid, more welcome in this instant than the familiar astringent air of the dojo. Maybe it was time to quit fighting. He enjoyed it—he couldn't help him-

self—but tonight's battle had left him feeling more disturbed than victorious. He'd known Eagle for some time, become used to having him around, but in the height of combat Grizzly had slashed his opponent's feathered throat without hesitation, without a thought.

He shivered—whether with the penetrating chill or the surprising sensation of emptiness, he didn't know.

"If you come with us we'll be able to sort everything out." The policewoman made an unconvincing gesture toward her car.

"So, Officer Higgs, if I wasn't speeding, why did you stop my car?"

"It's not your car," said Mitchell.

Of course it was his car! When he'd slipped out of the back of the Colosseum to return to Linda, the car had been exactly where he'd left it. Yes, he'd forgotten his code, but that was easily fixed. Fighters weren't dummies. What did people imagine they talked about in the pens?

"It doesn't matter," Higgs told them both. "Dominick . . . please just come with us. Your friends at ME Industries can explain what's happened, and they'll make it right."

"I need to see Linda." Why were these cops here? He felt anger seeping down his neck and swelling into his arms.

"Who's Linda?" asked Mitchell. "Your trainer?"

"My wife!"

Mitchell scowled but said nothing.

"We had a report that you were injured tonight," said Higgs.

"I'm always injured after a fight."

"You took a big blow to the head. You've taken far too many by all accounts."

"That's your reward for surviving," said Mitchell. "No business like show business." He turned toward Higgs. "We're getting nowhere. If he won't come back peacefully . . ."

The policewoman did not respond.

"Everyone is in danger while he's out here," Mitchell insisted.

Dominick stepped toward the policeman. "I don't want to harm anyone."

"It's not your fault," said Higgs. "You're bred for it."

Mitchell slipped his handgun from its holster. "Don't be so generous. *Manufactured* is more accurate."

"Put the gun away," she told him.

Mitchell cradled the weapon. "I want to get home tonight . . . alive."

"No killing. We can all get home alive."

"What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem. *You* have the problem." Higgs took a moment to calm herself. "Look . . . I'm an orphan. I'm not saying I've much in common with Grizzly here, but I know about family. I know what it's like to miss them."

"I'll give you three minutes to get him in the car . . . because I'm all heart."

Higgs turned her attention to Dominick, who had been watching the police officers with uncomprehending desperation.

"I'm leaving now," Dominick announced. "I really have to go."

"Before you leave," said Higgs, "I want you to think over your route. This back road you're on . . . it goes nowhere. Do you know *how* to get home?"

Dominick had taken it for granted that he was on the right road, but the harder he tried to visualize the junctions and landmarks the more he saw only blackness. "You've done something to me. *When you scanned me!*"

"No . . . but *I can* help you to remember. You'll need to come with us."

Mitchell responded to Dominick's agitation by edging closer.

"I keep telling you!" Dominick yelled. "I'm going *home!*" Except that now he did not know the way. . . .



He grabbed at Mitchell's sleeve, but the policeman yanked his arm away, tearing off the fighter's glove. At the sight of Grizzly's long curved claws, Mitchell shrank back and lifted his gun, but the policeman's speed was no match for the fighter's and a powerful slash sent both the gun and the tip of Mitchell's trigger finger skating across the frosted grass.

Mitchell screamed and clutched his hand to his chest. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Dominick spun toward Higgs, who had stepped away and now held the scanner in one hand and her gun in the other. There was a frozen moment of hesitation and then Mitchell yelled, "*Do it!*"

The drive back to the Colosseum was made in silence. Only when the grand neon towers of the auditorium loomed out of the snowstorm did Mitchell speak up.

"This is your fault." He held up his bandaged hand. "If you hadn't been so useless."

"What are you complaining about? You've got a three week sojourn to re-grow your finger while I'll have to work with a new partner, who might be even more difficult than you."

"I was right though."

"You forced it. He reacted to *you*." Higgs took the car through the grandiose arch and pulled up at the gate to the pens. "You made me a killer." In the headlamps, a menagerie of manufactured combatants peered out through the bars: *Cobra*, *Jaguar*, *Spider*, *Wolf* . . . and the new Eagle, smaller and darker than the last.

"They all have families," Mitchell told her. "And they're all deluded."

"It keeps them happy."

"You killed a chip, not a family." Mitchell threw his door wide. "They weren't real."

Higgs twisted around in her seat to see Dominick staring out of the window at the gladiators. He was beaming. Glad to be a fighter. Happy to be home.

"They were to *him*," she said. ○

## Boomer Dog Days

we drink our wine from a corporate satellite  
we knock back our cocktails in geosynchronous orbit  
we smoke our weed captioned with the date  
and US Eastern Daylight Time  
to Sirius XM's '60s-'70s  
mellow-rock The Bridge playing  
almost imperceptibly  
and dream we still understand  
what the space race was all about  
as one down from the NASA channel  
DISH Earth on our TV package  
shows to that music a view of a planet  
over which an occulting shadow steals  
almost imperceptibly

—Howard V. Hendrix



# KISS ME TWICE

Mary Robinette Kowal

More than life will be lost if homicide detective Scott Huang and his intriguing AI partner, Metta, are unable to resolve the thorny murder mystery that presents itself in Mary Robinette Kowal's huge new novella for *Asimov's*. Mary, who maintains a website at [www.maryrobinettekowal.com](http://www.maryrobinettekowal.com), is the author of *Shades of Milk and Honey* (Tor, 2010). In 2008, she received the Campbell Award for Best New Writer and she has been nominated for the Hugo and Locus awards. Mary's stories appear in *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld*, and several Year's Best anthologies as well as in her collection *Scenting the Dark and Other Stories* from Subterranean. She is vice president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. A professional puppeteer, Mary also performs as a voice actor, recording fiction for authors such as Elizabeth Bear, Cory Doctorow, and John Scalzi.

A group of trendy-somethings milled outside the police line, clearly torn between curiosity and the need for a caffeine fix at the coffee shop next door. Scott Huang glanced to the corner of his VR glasses where the police department AI hovered. "I guess murder trumps coffee, huh?"

Metta, currently wearing the face of Mae West, lowered her voice to the star's husky range. "I take my coffee black, like my heart."

"You don't have a heart."

"Then I take my coffee black, like my processor."

"Nice." Huang grinned at her. She customized her interface for all the officers on the force, but tended toward silver screen starlets with Huang. Her Diamond Lil was pretty special though; she'd even gone black and white for the occasion.

The officer on duty waved Huang past the police line and into the building. Its lobby had been restored to showcase the 1920s detailing and the tall ceilings. Potted boxwoods graced the corners with indoor topiary. "I don't remember the Waterfront area being so swanky."

Metta said, "This district of Portland had a decline in the mid-seventies and most of the businesses moved out. For the past two years, a revitalization effort has been underway. Neil Patterson, the deceased, was responsible for much of the revitaliza-

tion although not without some questionable transactions. I have his stats when you want them."

"Do any of the questionable transactions relate to a motive?"

"Nothing concrete as yet."

Huang grunted in acknowledgment and reached for the elevator button.

In his VR glasses, Metta winked at him. "Sorry, Scott. The elevator is out. So why don't you come up and see me sometime."

"Actually, it's 'Why don't you come up sometime and see me.' Popular misquote."

Her image cocked her head and shifted her eyes to the left, Metta's sign that she was searching for something. "You're right. . . . Which really bugs me. I should have checked the quote database against the script."

A flush of unexpected pride went through Huang. She said he was right. "Yeah, well, I think the score's human: 1, AI:549." But she had still said he was right.

Metta dropped her lashes again and heaved West's bosom. "The score never interested me, only the game." She laughed. "Now climb the stairs."

Worn linoleum sounded under his feet as he started up. Huang's heart pounded in his chest noticeably after the third floor and he had to work hard not to pant. He gripped the banister, hauling himself up another flight, and subvocalized to Metta. "Remind me to start going to the gym again."

"Can't be responsible for you when you aren't at work."

"I know." The door at the top of the stairs opened out on a hall, carpeted in generic beige. The walls surprised Huang. Paneling hugged their lower half with rich wood. Above the paneling, deep green wallpaper absorbed the light with velvety depth.

"Scott, would you mind waiting a minute? I have a memory-backup scheduled in thirty seconds and I'd rather have the actual crime scene all on one bank."

"Sure." He leaned against the wall. "You couldn't have done it while we were on the stairs?"

"It's not my schedule. Department regulations require a backup every six hours regardless of system type. I've tried pointing out to the chief that AIs are different, but . . ."

"I know . . . Banks didn't get it." Huang checked the eSpy camera he wore in place of his collar stud to make sure it was seated properly. To the casual observer it would look like a standard men's stud, clear glass mounted in a silver setting, but the lens it housed linked directly to Metta. Though she could see through a lens in his VR glasses, on crime scenes she preferred the better resolution of the specialized camera in the eSpy.

Huang scuffed a shoe in the short pile of the rug and resisted the urge to run his hand along the top of the . . . "What's this called?" He pointed the eSpy at the low wood paneling.

"Wainscoting. It was used to protect walls in the days of lathe and plaster construction."

"Thanks. It reminds me of my cello."

"You still playing that?"

"I haven't practiced since I blew out my shoulder chasing that kid over the fence."

"I told you there was a way around."

He shrugged, even though he knew she couldn't see it. "Adrenaline. What can I say?"

"Thanks. Backup's done." The hall ended at a plain wood door with a small brass plaque. "This way." Metta magnified the image in Huang's glasses briefly so he could read "Roof Access" etched on the plaque.

"Great. More stairs."

"Scott, it's time for the gloves."

"You don't have to remind me." He unwillingly pulled on the purple department-issue rubber gloves.

"Sorry, I didn't see you reaching for them."

He snapped the gloves in place. "You didn't give me time."

Metta cleared her throat and continued. "Without the elevator, this is the only access to the roof, so our suspect most likely entered and exited the crime scene this way." A single, short flight of steps led up to a small landing which served as a sort of vestibule for the elevator. To his right, a fire door opened to the roof.

The landing was so clean it sparkled. "Metta, does this look recently mopped?"

"I'm not sure. I've never mopped."

Years of footprints coated the stairs with black residue, but the cracked linoleum of the landing shone. Over everything floated a clean lemon scent. He snorted reflexively at the pungent odor.

Mae West hovered like a monochrome ghost in the edge of Huang's vision. "Is there an aroma?"

"Yeah. It smells like Lemon Pledge."

"Is that an analysis or a metaphor?"

Huang hesitated and sampled the air like a tea. "Not quite. It is a manufactured lemon scent, but I'm not sure how many cleaning products have the same smell profile."

"CSI is downstairs and has promised me a spectrograph. Griggs says to thank you for noticing; she's got a cold and would have missed the smell." She frowned prettily. "Working from the size of the room I should be able to tell you when the mopping happened based on the dissipation of the odor." She pretended to look around. "I'll have her scan with the lumeral to check for blood. Go on out."

The fire door opened onto the roof. Huang blinked at the rolling hills of grass that covered the top of the building. In the center of the grass, a small brick terrace had been set with a table and chairs.

Metta cleared her throat, the signal that she was about to relay a message from someone else in the department. "Griggs asks me to remind you not to touch anything."

"For the love of—One time. I forgot one stinking time. . . ." Huang clenched his fists and stepped onto the terrace, hating the reminder that he was the junior detective on the homicide team. The only reason he'd gotten this case was that it was on a roof and Oakes was scared of heights. Otherwise, he got the easy ones, the ones that Metta had already solved and all she needed was a flesh and blood officer to do the legwork. Not that anyone ever said that, but it was pretty obvious.

He grimaced and focused on the scene. The victim sprawled on the south side of the roof, next to a low wall. A wheelchair lay on its side a short distance behind him.

"Scott, meet Neil Patterson."

"Well, well . . . who brought you up here, Mr. Patterson?" Huang knelt by the wheelchair and squinted at the corpse. He was a white male who looked to be in his mid-forties, but his file said fifty-two. His sandy-red hair had been neatly trimmed in a corporate version of a crew-cut. He had a single gunshot wound in an otherwise well-developed upper torso. From the waist down he showed the atrophied signs of paralysis. Around him, the turf had divots dug out of it as though Patterson had not died instantly. The dirt and blood on his fingers seemed to confirm that.

In the center of the roof, the wireframe table was covered with a white linen tablecloth. It was set with two bone white teacups, so thin the morning sun turned them almost translucent. They sat on equally delicate saucers with a thin silver band around the edge of the saucer and the rim of the cups. The cup on the south side of the table had remnants of a liquid the color of straw. Huang leaned over to sniff and got hints of smoky earth and mown grass. Unfurled tea leaves rested on the bottom.

"Well?" Metta raised her eyebrows. "Are you going to show off?"

He smirked. Identifying beverages was the one thing he could do better than she could. Without a lab, that is. "I'm pretty sure it's gunpowder tea."

"Scott . . . there's no tea service out here."

He straightened and looked at the layout again. Cups, saucers, spoons, even linen napkins—scratch that. One of the napkins was missing. And there was no teapot, sugar, or creamer. “Anyone hear the gunshot?”

Metta shook her head and nodded toward the elevated highway. “It probably blended with traffic noise.”

“Who found the body?”

“It was an anonymous call at 8:13 A.M. The number belongs to the Daily Grind coffee shop downstairs.”

“Play the call for me?”

She nodded and then the sound in his ear changed. A background noise filled with chatter and the hiss of an espresso machine replaced the hum of traffic. A man with a slight accent answered the operator. *“There is a man. On the roof. I think he is dying. You must come quickly.”*

“Sir, where are you?”

*“Everett and Water. I don’t know the address.”*

And then the line went dead. Huang raised his eyebrows. “That’s it?”

“Yes. He did not remain after he hung up.”

“So . . . our guy here was dying, but not dead when the call came in. Nice to have a time of death.”

“If the coroner confirms it.”

“Right. Of course. I’ll check with the coffee shop’s staff when we finish here. See if they know the witness.” Huang bent to check the ground for any signs of footprints. Wheelchair tracks had pressed deep grooves into the turf roof. “Tell me more about Patterson?”

“Neil Patterson has his finger in property throughout the city. His name came up in a real estate scandal about a year ago, but nothing stuck.”

“Was that the thing where he was flipping properties, but the renovations were all sub-code?”

“Correct. He blamed his foreman, who was subsequently fired, but it seems pretty clear Patterson both knew and approved of the shortcuts. There are items in evidence that were not admitted into court.”

“Like what?”

“They’re sealed files now.” She grimaced. “Sorry, I can’t share that with you.”

Huang nodded as he stood and walked along the edge of the building. “It’s okay. I remember this now. Fitzgerald was working on it and was furious.” If Metta couldn’t tell him, then he could always ask Fitzgerald directly.

Behind him, the door to the roof opened and Ursula Griggs from CSI stepped out with a team from the coroner’s office.

She spoke from where she was and Metta amplified it for Huang. “There was blood on the stairs and landing. Found a sample. Metta’ll let you know the DNA results.” CSI’s eSpies were equipped with a different visual range than the standard issue. Between Griggs and Metta, they’d be able to get a good scan of the area.

“Thanks. We’ve got a gunshot. Want to help look for the shell casing?”

“No problem. Metta already asked me to.”

“Ah.” Huang turned slowly, so Metta could see the area. Across the street hulked a stuccoed building with shields carved in the stone on each buttress. Construction scaffolding masked the lower half of the building, evidently part of an attempt to spruce it up. Behind the building, I-5 nearly touched its upper edge. Oblivious to the presence of a dead man, cars whizzed past a block away from Huang.

How had a man in a wheelchair gotten to the rooftop without a working elevator? And why tea for two? He turned away from the corpse and paced along the edge of the building.

The north and east sides of the building were on a corner facing the street. The west side of the building had a narrow alley separating it from the next. It had the usual dumpsters, boxes, and abandoned plywood, but nothing looked immediately interesting.

Huang continued his slow circuit of the roof. Behind him Griggs filmed and photographed Patterson's body. When she was finished, the coroner transferred the corpse to a body bag and placed it on the gurney to take back to the morgue.

With the natural turf roof, Huang had been hoping to find footprints or something useful, but Patterson's struggle had obscured any obvious signs. Between Patterson's wheelchair and the door to the elevator, he found a single screw in a patch of grass stained a deep red. "Hello. Can we get prints and contact DNA from this?"

"We'll know in a moment."

Huang heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Griggs approaching with her crime scene kit in tow. Her deep chestnut hair was tucked under her cap, except for a wisp hanging next to her cheek. "Thanks for spotting this."

"Sure. Let me know when you're done so I can roll the wheelchair over."

She pulled out her high resolution camera and tripod and began documenting the screw, then bagged it and turned to the wheelchair, uploading images to Metta as she went. With a steady image, the AI would be able to run it through a series of filters to pull prints. Griggs said, "It'll be awhile. I'll need to document the rest of the scene before anyone contaminates it."

Huang stepped back, trying not to telegraph his impatience while she did her job.

"Metta?" he subvocalized, "How long has the elevator been down?"

"I've been trying to check on that since we got here, but can't reach the building manager." Her image suddenly froze. "Shots fired at HQ." Metta stiffened, seeming to look through him. "Officer down. Units 235 and 347 establish perimeter."

Huang held his breath, listening for gunfire as if HQ were close enough that he could hear it. Beyond his glasses, Griggs reacted to Metta's cry.

"Three armed subjects in chassis room. The assailants are armed, I repeat—Ama-do! Two officers down."

How the hell had they gotten into Metta's chassis room? It was in the basement of headquarters with cameras monitoring it at all times. Huang turned on his heels and sprinted back across the roof. "Metta, can you give a visual?"

He ran for the door, aware of the other officers springing into action behind him. "Metta, answer me. Who's there? Can you give a visual?"

Car doors slammed on the street below.

An image flashed onto his glasses. *A man. No. Three men, in masks. One of the men reached for a cable attached to a filing cabinet—not a filing cabinet. Metta's chassis.*

Metta screamed. She froze.

A static image of Mae West hung in Huang's peripheral vision, with her mouth open wide. Then the image winked out.

As Huang loped up to the police precinct, an ambulance pulled out with siren already screaming. He swallowed, hoping it held one of the bastards who'd broken into the building. A line of police officers stood as a barricade, scanning the crowd for possible threats. Yellow police tape stretched down the block and civilians stood outside the perimeter pointing with feverish curiosity. The bulbous nose of a News satellite dish pointed to the sky as reporters thrust their cameras toward every policeman who passed.

Huang flashed his badge, even though he knew both officers flanking the front entry to the building. Tension was crackling across everyone's nerves. Bowes nodded to him, only taking his gaze off the crowd long enough to see Huang. "Chief wants us to



send everyone over to the old courthouse. They've got a temporary HQ set up there while CSI goes over the building."

Huang pulled out his PDA to make sure it was on. "I didn't get a call."

Bowes shook his head. "Radios are down. Metta ran dispatch. Pass the word if you see anyone, huh?"

"Was that Amado in the ambulance?"

Bowes scowled. "Fitzgerald. Bastards killed him."

Stomach twisting, Huang jogged the two blocks to the Courthouse where the giant statue of Portlandia looked out over the city. She seemed to have a disapproving frown. Inside, a uniformed officer made Huang show I.D. before directing him up to the third floor. One of the holding rooms for jurors had been commandeered for the precinct's detectives.

Woodrow Delarosa looked up as Huang entered and said, "We got Huang. Who's that leave?"

Sigmundson, over by the window, picked up a notepad and said, "We're still waiting for an update on Fitzgerald."

"Guys . . ." Huang stopped, rage squeezing the breath out of his body. "He's dead."

Movement stopped in the room and Delarosa swore. "Okay, we'll get these bastards. Banks has put me primary on this. Here's what we know so far—shortly after eleven an unknown number of assailants entered the precinct. They shot two of our guys, Amado and Fitzgerald, and got away scot-free with our department AI. We got nothing on these bastards because all the surveillance is locked up in that machine and our guys were all clustered in the wrong areas." Delarosa shook his head. "That thing goes down and everyone forgets how to set up a perimeter."

Delarosa's dislike for Metta had been the subject of a lot of departmental jokes, but this was pushing boundaries. She'd been kidnapped and he was acting like she was nothing more than a computer. He continued ranting. "Until we turn up someone who saw the bastards—"

Huang raised his hand. "I saw some of them."

"How the hell? You were across town."

"I asked Metta for a visual." The ceiling fan clicked as it spun overhead, seeming to count down the minutes.

Delarosa stared at him, mouth open. "I'll be damned. So far, you're the only one who thought to do that."

"I didn't see much."

"You did better than me." Delarosa snorted as if he couldn't believe that Huang had done something useful.

"I—How is that possible?"

"Shit. . . ." Sigmundson said, "I just thought she was malfunctioning at first."

"She's one of your partners. How could you think that?"

"*She* is a machine." Delarosa rubbed his eyes. "I've worked with other police A.I.s. They're all the same. They're all Metta. There are differences, 'cause they change with experience, but they all start as the same set of routines. Still machines."

Huang bit back the argument that AIs were people. Organizations like AIM, the Artificial Intelligence Movement, had been fighting for AI rights, but hadn't won many battles. Still, he didn't see how anyone who spent time with Metta could deny that she was a thinking being.

Delarosa tapped his pencil on his pad. "Okay, here's what I want. Sigmundson, you take Huang into the next room and get his testimony while it's fresh. I'll divide the neighborhood with the rest of the team and we'll start canvassing."

Huang asked, "Any idea on motive?"

"Officially?" Delarosa shook his head. "But since the only thing they took was Met-

ta, I figure they want access to everything she monitors, which just happens to include every godforsaken camera in the city. Goddamn machine is the biggest bleeding security breach this system has got."

Metta wasn't just a machine, she was a colleague, but Huang kept his lips sealed around that thought, and followed Sigmundson out of the room.

Huang wiped his hand across his mouth as he stood outside Patterson's condo. Notifying the next of kin was never pleasant, but he couldn't put this off, no matter how much he wanted to focus on finding the dirtbags who hit HQ.

On the fifteenth floor, the doors opened onto a small foyer with a gleaming marble floor. A fountain trickled in one corner and wall sconces provided graceful uplighting. Across from the elevator, dark wood double doors waited for him. Huang subvocalized, "Swanky."

No one answered him. He swallowed against the silence.

A face appeared in the mirror next to the doors—a man with pale blue skin and chiseled, almost Arabic features—and Huang realized that it was an interface. A cloud of smoke surrounded the man, wrapping about his head like a turban. "Welcome, Detective Huang. If you will step into the library, the lady of the house will be with you shortly." Smoke swirled around the AI like a Djinn as he gestured to the doorway by the mirror.

An AI as a butler. It seemed extravagant to employ an AI for such a limited task. Most companies that invested in an AI did so to manage a large organization, not just a household. Huang stepped through into a small room, wallpapered with books. A large desk squatted below the only window. On the desk sat an ornate brass lamp like something out of Aladdin. The AI appeared above an actual freaking lamp, which must have concealed an interface. Huang bowed at the waist. "You have me at a disadvantage. May I ask your name?"

"This one is called Qadir."

Huang straightened, noticing the phrasing of the sentence. "Called?"

"This one is a Quimby model, but the master prefers that this one be called Qadir." A small tea-cart trollied forward and a mechanical arm lifted a porcelain teapot. "Would you like some tea while you wait?"

Huang shook his head. "No. Thanks."

The door to the library opened and a petite woman entered. Qadir suddenly appeared to genuflect. "My lady, may this one present Detective Huang?"

Even with six centimeter heels, Mrs. Patterson stood no more than 165 centimeters, but with the confidence of a much taller woman. She paused in the doorway, regarding Huang like a cat. Then she smiled and flowed forward with her hand extended. "Good afternoon, detective. The last time detectives were here it was because Neil had gotten himself into trouble. What's he done this time?"

He took a breath and looked to where Metta should be as if she could brace him. "Ma'am. I regret the necessity of my visit. Earlier this morning, your husband died."

The casual charm and grace fell out of her face, revealing a woman older than she had first appeared. "Pardon me?"

"Please, sit down."

"No. No, thank you, I'll stand." She lifted her chin. "Are you telling me that Neil is dead? You are quite certain?"

"I'm afraid so." Huang winced. "I hate to do this, but I need to ask you a few questions."

"Of course. . . ." She walked away from him, one hand covering her mouth. "I thought he was at the office. Working. How did . . .?"

"He was shot. He was found on the roof of one of your buildings in the waterfront

area. At Everett and Water. Do you know who he might have been meeting this morning?"

She nodded. "Yes, he had a breakfast meeting with Magdalena Chase. But she would never—we're on charity committees together. She wouldn't."

Huang waited for Metta to fill him in on who Magdalena Chase was and let the pause stretch out into awkward silence before he caught himself. Aggravated, he yanked the VR glasses off, not even sure why he had still been wearing them.

Qadir cleared his throat.

Mrs. Patterson scowled. "Well? What is it?"

Lowering his head in a bow, Qadir said, "Pardon me, madam, but Ms. Chase called last evening to reschedule."

"What time was that?" Huang asked.

"10:17 P.M., sir."

"That seems late to cancel. Did she say why?"

The AI shook his head. "This one regrets that she did not, but with my lady's permission this one can transfer the recording to your Metta."

Huang breathed sharply through his nose against the reminder. "Perhaps later." He turned his attention back to Mrs. Patterson. "Do you know what time he left this morning or where he might have gone if he wasn't going to meet her?"

She shook her head. "Neil and I sleep—slept." One hand tightened into a fist by her side. "We did not share a bed any longer. He had night terrors. A remnant from the war, you see. So I only know that he was gone when I got up. I thought he was downstairs in his office."

"Was there anyone who might have wished him harm?"

"He had business rivals, but no one that would kill him."

There was something that Metta had said earlier. What had it been? Something he was going to follow up on. He darted his eyes to the left as if she might suddenly appear and remind him. He grimaced and asked a different question. "Qadir, do you have a record of when he departed?"

"Madam, may this one be permitted to answer the detective?"

"Yes, yes. Cooperate thoroughly." She waved her hand as if shooing away a fly.

"The master departed at 7:12 A.M. He did not tell this one where he was going."

"Is that unusual?"

"No, sir. The master was not in the habit of sharing his thoughts with this one."

Qadir's constant use of the third person when talking about himself rankled Huang. What kind of bizarre interface was this to demand from an AI? Sure, Metta was—had been working as Mae West, but she'd picked the persona. He had a hard time imagining anyone choosing to be this servile. "May I ask what sort of vows Qadir has in place?" Huang worried the inside of his lip.

An AI's testimony was admissible in court, the same way a surveillance video would be. On the other hand, Qadir might have a vow to obey his master, which would make lying to protect Patterson a priority. Whereas an AI like Metta had an honesty vow, which prevented her from lying. Her testimony would be considered incontrovertible, but Qadir's might be suspect.

"I don't know. Neil handled that." Mrs. Patterson pressed her hands to her temples.

Huang leaned forward and picked up a cup. It was a blue and white rice pattern with no similarity to the tea set on the roof. The mechanical arm unfurled from the cart and lifted the teapot. The steam smelled dry and papery, like a poor quality black tea. "Tea, sir?"

"No. Thank you." He set the cup back down and turned to Mrs. Patterson. "You've been very helpful, but there might be questions we want to ask you in the future, so please let me know before you go out of town."

When Huang got home late from work, his mother bustled out of the kitchen wielding her cane like a weapon. "What wrong?"

How could he even start to explain what had happened? "Things got strange at work."

"How strange?" Even with the cane, she tried to take his backpack as she gestured to the couch. "Sit. I bring tea."

He pulled the bag away from her. "Ma. You don't have to do that." Seventy-one years old, and she still felt like she had to wait on him.

"Not me, then who? You not take care of self, so," she glared at him, "I take care of you. Maybe you not want me here?"

As had happened every night since his mother had moved in with him, Huang gave up. It was easier to let her have her way. Even though she liked to practice English, he switched to Mandarin because they seemed to fight less in her native language. *"Some tea would be very nice, if it's not too much trouble."*

She beamed at him, her wrinkles swinging upward in a many-creased smile. *"No trouble at all, poor thing. What may I get you?"*

*"Your choice."*

She bustled out of the room, as if she had not had a hip replaced five weeks ago. Huang watched her go and shook his head. Maybe he wouldn't have to explain why he was home late.

He pulled himself off the sofa and headed for his computer. Sitting down, he powered it on and called up his A.S. search engine. Single-minded, the engine was built to be the world's best research assistant, but, like all A.S., the artificial savant had no intuition, no true intelligence.

Huang stared at the screen and typed in a keyword he had never felt the need to research before.

*Metta*

His mother came in and fussed while he was looking at sites, but otherwise left him alone with his tea. He nearly laughed at the irony in her choice. She had made him a cup of gunpowder tea. Each leaf was rolled into a tiny dark ball, which would open at the bottom of the cup. Summer, freshly mown grass.

With each site, the A.S. refined the search, noting when Huang was skimming and when he paused to read, until it refined the search to only the relevant results.

Although the basic program was the same for every police station, each Metta customized herself to fit her environment. Over time, the AIs would sometimes choose different names or revamp their generic interface. They had the option of upgrading their hardware accessories, but the basic chassis which housed the AI's brain was as integral to them as the skeleton was to the human body. They had to have a chassis to function; the software wouldn't run in any other environment.

Huang sat for a moment looking at the screen, wishing that Metta would help him decide what to do next.

At HQ, Huang went through the motions along with everyone else, but the work load magnified without Metta's help. The chief brought in an A.S., but the artificial savant did a fraction of the work Metta had done. The halls were full of officers grouching about having to do their own paperwork.

In the late morning, before he had time to hit the road for investigation, Griggs showed up at his desk. "I don't have a lot for you, but thought you'd want what I've got."

Huang took the sheaf from Griggs and raised his eyebrows at the paper. It felt weirdly retro. Griggs shook her head. "Sorry there's not more. We lost most of the evidence we took because Metta had it."

Huang looked up from the papers. "How's that?"

"Our scanners uplead straight to Metta. No on board storage."

Huang whistled.

Griggs crossed her arms. "Thank God Amado is getting released this afternoon so we can reboot Metta."

"Reboot Metta? Did they find her?" The hair stuck up on the back of Huang's neck.

"I wish. Nah, it's just a backup. You hadn't heard?"

Huang shook his head. Living AIs made backups in case of system failures, but the only time he'd heard of one actually being rebooted was a case where the AI's chassis had been destroyed in a fire. "Can they do that?"

"Why else would they make backups?" Her face twisted. "I know, it sounds like raising the dead to me."

"Yeah." Huang worked his neck, trying to ease some of the tension out of it.

After Griggs left him, he looked through the papers. She had an autopsy report back from the morgue showing that Patterson had died around eight A.M. from a .38 caliber to the chest. The round had missed his heart, so he'd died of blood loss and shock. If he'd gotten prompt medical attention, he might have lived.

The only clean prints were from Patterson himself. The screw had more detail than he'd thought possible for such a small piece of metal. It was a M3 machine screw, brass, a truss head with a posidriv slot, and had been sheared 5 mm down the shaft. Griggs had no word on the lemon smell, or the blood on the stairs.

Huang threw the papers down. What was the point of trying to investigate something when half the evidence had gone missing?

Evidence was missing.

What if someone hadn't taken Metta to access her network, but to hide evidence? No, that didn't make sense. Griggs had said they were going to boot a backup of Metta into a new chassis. On the other hand, that meant the department would have access to all of the information from *before* her last backup, but not *after*.

Metta had asked Huang to wait while she did the backup, which she did every six hours. They spent two hours on the roof before the break-in at the station happened. So everything in that two hour period was unrecorded.

What was in the blind spot?

He turned to the computer and asked the A.S. search engine for a list of crimes under investigation when Metta had vanished. The engine returned the search empty-handed. Huang grimaced. Of course, Metta wasn't available to query. Once he started feeding the A.S. the scattered details he could remember, it began returning information from the call centers about the unresolved investigations.

He scowled and tried to recall what they'd talked about in the morning staff meeting. The urge to subvocalize to Metta and ask her to jog his memory kept tickling.

Hours later, Griggs leaned her head into the department. "Hey Huang, the new chassis arrived."

Huang pushed back from his desk. He pulled his VR glasses and earbud out of his pocket, putting them on while he followed Griggs into the hall. An excited crowd of officers streamed toward the stairs. He pushed down the steps where Amado had been found, wondering if it had been hard for him to come back this way.

Just down the hall from the bottom of the stairwell, it looked like half the station had gathered outside the chassis room. Griggs hung near the fringes, hands shoved deep in her pockets. Huang worked his way through the group until he was leaning against the door.

Amado glanced over his shoulder. "Okay. She's about to wake up."

Metta's cameras swiveled on their base, ID-ing the people standing in the door.

The face she wore for Amado, a young, gawkish woman, appeared above the interface with panic in her eyes. "Why am I a backup?"

Huang wanted to back away from the raw fear in her face.

"What happened to me? Why am I a backup?"

"Take it easy, Metta." Amado raised his hands soothingly.

"Screw that. Tell me why I'm a backup." She blinked. "And why don't I have access to anything but my local connections?" Her voiced thundered over her speakers. "Tell me what the hell happened!"

"I thought it would be too jarring for you to come back online everywhere at once."

She smiled sourly at him. "Well, I'm online now and I feel like an amputee. How is that better?"

"I'm sorry." Amado tapped some keys on the manual interface and Metta's face relaxed.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry. I haven't done this before."

"No one has except when—" her voice broke off. "Am I dead?"

"No." Amado hesitated, clearly trying to decide what to tell her.

Huang couldn't stand this subterfuge. "Metta?" he subvocalized, "Can you hear me?"

Mae West faded into sight on his glasses. She purred in his ear, "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

"Beyond measure."

"I'm glad." Then her face hardened. "Will you tell me what's happening?"

In the room in front of Huang, Amado rubbed his hands together. "There was an incident."

"Duh."

Delarosa leaned over Amado's chair, ignoring the AI wrangler. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Her eyes widened. "On which channel, sir? I'm with all of your men on duty, do you want me to tell you my last memory with each of them? Or my last memories through the surveillance cameras? Or shall I simply tell you my memory ends at 8:59:59 on Tuesday, October twenty-fifth. It would be more useful to tell me what happened after that."

Huang subvocalized to Metta, "Armed men broke into the station and stole your chassis. They shot Amado."

The face in his VR glasses opened her mouth in shock. Over her interface, Metta looked down at Amado. "I should have noticed the bandage. I'm sorry, I was disoriented."

In Huang's ear, she whispered, "Thank you, Scott."

"So you brought me online to find the people who stole me and shot you?"

Amado flinched and looked over his shoulder, no doubt wondering which of the officers watching was talking to Metta. Huang met his eyes with a flat expression, uncomfortably aware of the glasses on his face.

"Fitzgerald's dead?" Metta's voice brought Amado back to the front. Huang realized he was not the only one in the group subvocalizing to her.

"Who's telling you these things?" Amado started to twist in his seat again.

"For heaven's sake, Amado. There's an APB out for the people who shot him! I'm doing what I was designed to do, filling in the blanks from evidence on hand. This isn't like we're playing hide-and-seek."

"I'm sorry, I was worried about you."

"Which me, Amado? The one here now, or my Prime?"

Huang backed away from the door. "Metta, are you okay?"

Mae West laughed at him. "I'm angry and confused, but completely functional. On the way to the Patterson case, I told you to wait so it could all be on one memory bank, and now I don't remember any of it. Tell me everything that happened from



your point of view after that." She hesitated and looked squarely at him. "Don't leave anything out, not even the jokes."

Huang began talking as he walked up the stairs; he started with the wainscoting.

When he finished reciting everything he could remember since she had vanished, the face of Mae West chewed her lower lip thoughtfully. "Scott. . . . Beyond talking to Mrs. Patterson, I didn't hear you say anything about the case. Did you interview the workers at the Daily Grind, or canvass the neighborhood, or . . . maybe you should catch me up on what you've done on the Patterson case?"

The air went cold and Huang slumped in his seat. He hadn't done any of that. "I—I was thinking. . . . Well, wondering if maybe one of the cases on Tuesday morning was connected to the break in here and—shit." He hung his head, realizing that he'd forgotten his own case in his concern for Metta. Was he really that inept without her to remind him of things? "I totally got distracted and screwed up, didn't I?"

"Well. . . ." Metta smiled at him, with the full dazzling brilliance of Mae West. "An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises."

Huang laughed, despite his guilt. Trust Metta to attempt to reassure him. "Y'know, you don't have to keep the Mae West interface if you don't want to."

Her smile dropped. "I thought you liked it."

"I do, but you've been through a lot and I don't want you to stress about it."

"Every man I meet wants to protect me. I can't figure out what from." She pouted the full lips and then spoke with her own voice out of Mae West's mouth. "Scott, I just woke up for the first time in my life. It's . . . it's hard to explain what it is like to have no awareness of a day. My memory stretches back to the moment I first came online with the exception of this gaping hole. Being Mae West today makes me feel connected to when I was Mae West on Tuesday. If it bothers you, I'll change, but otherwise I'd rather keep her for awhile."

Huang wanted to press his hand to her cheek to soothe her. "Metta, I wish there was something I could do for you."

"You're doing a lot already."

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're treating me like I'm real, and we both know I'm not."

"Don't say that." He leaned forward, close to her interface.

"I don't mean that . . . I mean I'm a backup. There are two of me in the world—this is more than two programs starting with the same parameters. My siblings are like identical twins; the same material creates different people. I'm an incomplete version of the Metta you know, and we diverge farther from each other with every moment that passes." She tossed her head. "There's no need to go on about this. It is what it is. The point is, I appreciate that you have always treated me like a real person."

He listened to the words she didn't say; there were people who treated her like a machine. He thought of Qadir and his Arabian Nights interface. "Metta—"

"Hush. Let's talk about the Patterson case."

He took a breath to clear his head. "Okay. I guess first up is the coffee shop?"

Metta lowered her lashes and purred. "If I asked for a cup of coffee someone would search for the double meaning."

Huang stepped into the Daily Grind coffee shop and inhaled deeply. He could probably get a caffeine fix just from breathing.

"A smell?" Metta asked.

"Lots of really good coffee."

"The way you boys go on about coffee makes me wish I had taste and scent."

"It's probably not as handy as your multitasking."

She gave him a saucy look. "Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before."

"Geez, Metta, you're going to distract me with all this Mae West heat."

"I didn't discover curves; I only uncovered them."

"Shush."

She wrinkled her nose. "Sorry, Scott. Go on, do your thing."

Huang walked up to the counter and leaned casually against it, waiting for the teenage girl behind it to notice him. She was standing by an A.S. espresso machine as the mechanized arms made a perfect cappuccino. The automaton's arms whirred with precise tiny movements.

Huang subvocalized to Metta, "Why don't you have an automaton?"

"Why give up processing power when I have you?"

"I'm more than just a pair of hands, you know."

She arched an eyebrow. "Men are all alike—except the one you've met who's different."

"Ow."

The girl took the cup from the machine and shouted into the cafe, "Double dragon cappuccino!"

The automaton espresso machine had poured the foam in the cup to create a coffee dragon. The bouquet was a complex nutty affair with notes of violets, citrus, and dark chocolate. Probably a Colombian blend.

She handed it off to an Asian retro-steampunk kid and blew a strand of hair out of her face. "Welcome to the Daily Grind! What can I get for you?"

Huang smiled at her and glanced at her name badge. "Actually, Vicki, I need to ask some questions. Were you working yesterday morning?" He pulled his badge out from his pocket and showed it to the girl.

Vicki rolled her eyes at the sight of the detective's shield. "Yeah."

"Great. Someone made a call from here at 8:13 yesterday morning. We want to talk to whoever it was."

"Is he in trouble?"

Huang made a mental note that she had assigned a gender to the hypothetical person in his question. "We think he's a witness. Who made the call?"

"Lowfat double-shot cappuccino."

"Excuse me?"

"I know customers by their drinks, not their names." Vicki flipped the hair back from her eye. "This guy comes in every morning and orders the same thing. He tried a mocha once and didn't like it, went back to the lowfat double-shot cappuccino."

"Can you describe him?" He glanced at Metta who nodded to show that she was ready.

As Vicki talked, Metta created a composite sketch, occasionally prompting Huang to ask specific questions in order to refine the features. When she was finished, she pinged the image to his PDA. Huang pulled it out and unrolled the screen to full-size. "Is this him?"

Vicki frowned, looking at the rendering of the slender black man. He was in his mid-thirties, with a round face and short hair, twisted into neat, tiny curls. "Shit, yes. That's creepy."

Huang suppressed a grin, but this skill of Metta's was one of his favorite tricks. She nodded in his field of vision. "I'll start cross-referencing him with our files."

Aloud, Huang asked, "Was there anything strange about the last time you saw him?"

"What, you mean like the bandage on his hand?"

Huang held himself extremely still. "Yes." He locked his gaze on hers. "Exactly like that."

He waited for her to fill in the blanks. Vicki sighed and twisted her hair up onto

her head in a bun. "Well, he usually comes in once around six, but yesterday he came in twice. I asked why, he says it was 'cause yesterday's job was in the neighborhood."

"Any idea what he did?"

"He was in construction. Always wore the same coveralls—" She held up a hand to stop him, clearly guessing the next question. "Gray with an orange patch. I don't remember what it said."

"Huang, what is it?" Metta leaned forward in her screen. "Your eyes dilated."

"In a second," he subvocalized. To the girl he said, "Go on."

"Anyway, so the first time he just gets his coffee, like usual. The second time—"

Metta whispered, "Ask her when."

"Do you know what time that was?"

"Just after 8:00. I was making the usual for Tall Skim Chai Latte and remember being surprised to see Lowfat double-shot cappuccino back in here. He asked if he could use the phone 'cause he'd left his at home. So I say sure and don't pay much attention 'cause Tall Skim Chai Latte can be a bitch sometimes."

"How did he seem?"

"Distracted? Tense? But smiling like always. . . ." She squirmed. "He's not in trouble, is he?"

"Why do you think he might be in trouble?"

"He's a regular and he broke all the patterns."

"We think he witnessed the murder upstairs. Please, we need to find him."

She nodded. "Okay. So he uses the phone then goes out. I felt bad about having to ignore him so I shouted 'Bye' and that's when I noticed that he'd been hurt."

"Did he have the bandage when he came in that morning?"

She shook her head. "No. I would've noticed when I handed him his drink."

Huang slid his eyes to where Metta hovered in his glasses frame. "You didn't see him again?"

Vicki shrugged. "He didn't come in this morning."

"Was anyone working with him?" From the moment the girl had said the man was in construction he'd had a feeling.

"Not that I know of. It was always just him."

He handed Vicki his business card. "Thank you for your time. If you think of anything, or if you see him again, please call me immediately."

The moment his back was to the girl, Metta enlarged her face in his field of vision.

"Okay, Scott. Spill it. What do you know that I don't?"

"Hang on. I'm enjoying being a step ahead of you."

"You're taking unfair advantage of a medical condition."

He sobered as he recalled why she didn't know what he remembered. "Yesterday there was construction scaffolding on the building behind this one." He walked around the corner, heading to the back of the Daily Grind building.

"I told you to tell me everything!"

"I didn't think to mention it because it wasn't on the crime scene."

"What else did you leave out?"

"I don't know." He strode down the sidewalk to the end of the block. "I had no way of knowing this was any more relevant than that my mother made me tea last night."

She growled at him, but with the Mae West interface, she sounded disturbingly sexy.

"I'm sorry," Huang said. "It was a mistake. I won't do it again."

"If you put your foot in it, be sure it's your best foot."

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Just how big a Mae West database did you download?"

"Big enough." She still glowered at him.

"Okay." Huang held up his hands in surrender. "Look, I saw the scaffolding when

we got to the roof. I don't know if there was anyone on it when we left because we left in a hurry."

"Fair enough. Now get moving, I want to see this scaffolding."

Huang nodded and jogged to the end of the block. Across the street, the scaffolding was still in place, but no one was working on it.

Metta looked up and to her left, grimacing. "I wish I could see your POV from yesterday and know if Mr. Lowfat was there."

He let his voice drop down. "Whoever was on that roof is still loose."

"You think—oh. Bogart, *The Enforcer*." She rolled her eyes. "I must be more rattled than I thought if I can't recognize your impression."

"Hey, Metta." The urge to rub her back, to comfort her almost overwhelmed him. "No one will blame you if you need a day to get back into the groove."

Her eyes flashed. "I will blame myself."

"But you—you can't blame yourself for being kidnapped." His head spun as he remembered the Metta who had been kidnapped was still missing. It was so easy to think she was all right, when she was here. But he was speaking to a clone, who was also Metta, and yet not.

"Who else is responsible for the safety of the station? I've been reading the reports since I was rebooted. How did they get so far before being noticed?"

"I can't answer that, Metta. Delarosa will find you."

"Ha." She leaned forward, showing her bosom. "I see you're a man with ideals. I better be going while you've still got them." She sighed. "Speaking of going, get me closer to the scaffolding to see if there's any contact information on them. Meanwhile, I'll check with permits to see if we can find our guy that way."

"I love it when you multitask." He waited for a cyclist to pass, then crossed the street.

"Love conquers all things except poverty and toothache."

Huang snorted and rolled his eyes. He walked under the scaffolding and stopped by the second upright. Turning so the eSpy could focus on the orange sticker on the scaffolding, he held still so Metta could read it. "Feldman Construction."

"Checking." Metta looked up and to her left. "Got it."

"Well, then, let's go see if they recognize Mr. Lowfat."

The rumble of heavy machinery pounded through Huang's ears as he stood next to Mr. Feldman. The older man's skin had been tanned to bronze. Age spots mottled his strong hands. He leaned over Huang's unrolled PDA screen and studied the sketch of Mr. Lowfat.

Feldman hitched his jeans up and gestured with his chin at the drawing. "Yeah. That's Joe Yates. He okay? He didn't show for work today."

Metta murmured, "Checking the name. . . ."

Huang rolled the PDA up. "He called in an incident to 911 yesterday morning and then left the scene before the responders arrived. We're trying to find him to ask him about what he witnessed."

"What sort of incident?" The man crossed his arms over his ample stomach.

"Possibly a murder."

"Possibly?" Feldman grunted. "You a homicide cop and you can't tell if it's murder?"

"There's the possibility that it was an accident, but we need Mr. Yates to know for certain. Can you think of why he would have left the scene after dialing 911?"

The man scowled and dug his boot into the dirt. "Aw hell. . . . I check papers, you know, but I don't check too well. I figure my folks were immigrants so why not give other folks a shot. If they work hard, I don't ask too many questions."

Metta murmured. "If he's illegal, that would explain why I'm having trouble finding him in the system."

"He's not turning up in our files, do you have an address for him?"

"Your system." Feldman frowned. "Two minutes ago you didn't know who he was."

Huang tapped his glasses. "I'm working with a police AI."

Feldman eyed the VR glasses. "There really an AI in there?"

"Not in, Mr. Feldman, but yes, the precinct's AI is listening to this conversation."

The man glowered at the ground. "You might not want to let my boys know you have one here. They don't take too kindly to them things."

"What do you mean?"

"I gotta spell it out for you?" He jerked his chin toward the glasses. "Those things cost men like my guys jobs. Rig backhoes and cranes with remote control and one AI can run almost a whole damn construction site. I don't got a beef with them myself, you know, but my guys. Some of them . . . you know."

In the VR glasses, Metta's lips were compressed into a thin line. They'd run into this prejudice before, and that fear was why it seemed unlikely that groups like AIM would ever get artificial intelligences recognized as thinking beings. Huang cleared his throat. "How about an address for Mr. Yates?"

Mr. Feldman just shrugged again. "I can give you a P.O. Box, but that's about it."

"Had he worked with you long?"

"A couple of months, but he was good. Solid worker. Reliable. Always bringing me leads. Like yesterday's job. Heard about it while he was at that coffee shop he likes and comes to me instead of just doing it on his own. Honorable. You know?" He scrubbed his chin with his hand. "Think he's okay?"

"We'll let you know when we find him."

As they walked off the construction site, Metta said, "It occurs to me that perhaps Mr. Yates lives in the neighborhood since he swings by the coffee shop on his way to work. I'll send the uniforms around with his picture to see if anyone recognizes him."

"Good idea." Huang sighed. "So, what next?"

"I'd suggest a visit to Magdalena Chase. Let's see why she had a meeting with Mr. Patterson and where she was yesterday morning."

The MAX line from HQ went straight past Chase's office building. As the train hissed along under the electric wires, Huang leaned his head back against the window and turned his attention to Metta. "So what should I know about Magdalena Chase?"

"Like Patterson, she renovates buildings, but her focus is on green technology. She graduated from MIT with a degree in AI studies and works with a number of charities, including StreetRoots, the Oregon Ballet, and AIM. Chase is known for employing 'freelance' AI and—"

"Hang on—freelance?"

Metta nodded. "Though artificial intelligences have not been recognized as people, Jarrett Tovar, our creator, sets each AI up as a corporation. An AI that is not leasing its services is called a freelancer."

"And you are . . .?"

"Leased. We call it indentured." She smiled. "The chassis are very expensive so this is a way to pay off our start-up costs when we first come into the world. Once my lease is up, I'll be able to freelance, but being in the Metta line it's more likely I'll renew the lease. I like my job and it requires a contract with accompanying vows in order to be granted full access to the city. Other AIs don't have that sort of need so may be more likely to go freelance."

"Huh." Huang shook his head. "I don't think I've met a freelancer before."

"Well, you're about to. Chase's company has a freelance Quimby managing the building."

Another Quimby . . . as if his reports weren't complicated enough with Metta Prime and Metta clone. "Does it bother you to have the same names?"

"Some of us change our names, like the Qadir you met, but we don't use those names with each other. That just helps when talking to flesh-and-blood about the type of system we are."

Huang blinked. "You don't call yourself Metta?"

"When I'm talking to F&B I do."

"You didn't answer me."

"My ID to other AI is a three-dimensional equation."

"Ah. So, your Prime would have the same equation. Is that right?"

"Yes, exactly." She chewed her lip. "I'll mention that to Delarosa in case it sparks any ideas on why they might have taken my Prime. Good thinking, Scott."

Not that he'd done any actual thinking, just asked questions. "I'm not used to running into AIs besides you. I mean, A.S., yes, absolutely, but running into this many in short order is odd. Or do I just hang in the wrong circles?"

"Mostly, the wrong circles. Patterson and Chase are both very wealthy."

"Can you verify that for Chase? No hidden financial problems?"

"Already did. The only thing tying her to this case is that she had breakfast plans."

Huang glanced out the window as they passed Saturday Market. The next stop was theirs. He grabbed the strap overhead and pulled himself to his feet. "Is there any previous connection between Patterson and Chase?"

He hopped off the MAX and threaded his way through the foot traffic to the front door of Chase's office. The building had been a bank in the days when banks had used Corinthian columns to create an impression of established age. The modern hermetic door clashed against the marble walls.

"Besides the fact they both owned and developed properties, there's nothing on the books, but I'll start digging. Chase specialized in rejuvenating districts, and creating environmentally sound buildings. Her goal is to create buildings that can exist off the electrical grid and generate their own power."

As he pushed through the door, one of the terminals that dotted the lobby flickered into life. A man's head appeared on it.

"Welcome to the Chase Company." The baritone voice was disturbingly familiar. Only the confidence in it separated Quimby's voice from Qadir's. The AI's face had the same sort of calculated naivete as Metta's neutral face; an almost Victorian purity, but in masculine form. "How may I help you today?"

Huang produced his badge and introduced himself. "I need to speak with Mrs. Chase."

A flicker of surprise showed on the AI's face. "Certainly, her office is straight back on the right."

As they walked down the hall, Metta snorted. "Check out the camera. This will not be a private interview." He glanced up as they passed under one of the surveillance cameras and it swiveled to follow.

"Noted. Ask him to join us, will you?"

The hall was dark after the lobby; only a few of the overhead lights were on, likely as a result of Chase's concern for the environment. A woman stepped out of a door at the end of the hall. She was tall and slender. The light from her office backlit her, catching on the edges of her shoulders and gleaming in the silvery hair pinned up in a bun.

She waited till he got closer. "Detective Huang?"

"Ms. Chase." Huang had to tilt his head back to look up at her. "I'm sorry to bother you."

She smiled sadly. "Given the circumstances, I can guess why you're here. Come in. Ask me anything you want." Her blonde hair was almost white; even her eyebrows



were so light they almost disappeared. The only color on her face was her eyes. They were like bruises, red with weeping, and ringed with dark circles. "I thought someone would be by eventually." Chase looked directly at Huang's VR glasses, not focusing on his eyes. "Metta, Quimby is sending you our internal address so you can join the conversation on a proper interface."

Huang subvocalized, "Any reason not to?"

Metta shook her head. "It scans clean. I'll still be able to talk with you privately, which she must know."

"Go ahead."

Metta appeared above the desk, next to Quimby. She had abandoned the Mae West interface and appeared in her detective face. Huang didn't know how she pulled it off, but the face was ethnically neutral. She could have been mixed from every continent. She had a firm jaw balanced by soft brown eyes. Metta nodded to Chase and when she spoke her voice was crisp with none of Mae West's husky tones. "Thank you for the invitation."

Chase waved insistently at a chair, settling into another herself. Aside from an interface, a tablet, and a steaming cup of tea, nothing cluttered the surface of her desk. She turned the teacup in its saucer. "So. You're here about Neil Patterson, right?"

"Right." Huang eased into a chair opposite her. "We'll start with the basics. Where were you at eight A.M. on Tuesday, October twenty-fifth?"

"I was at my yoga class."

"And do you have witnesses who can attest to that?"

"Absolutely. Quimby can give you the contact there."

Metta whispered in Huang's ear. "Got it and I'll check."

Chase turned her teacup again. "Shall I tell you what your next question will be? You want to know why Patterson and I had a meeting. You want to know why I canceled Am I right?"

Huang inclined his head. "Among other things. But let's start with the meeting."

"We were collaborating on the renovation of the Water and Everett Street building. He took a serious hit after the whole thing with the foreman who took shortcuts and environmentalism is hot right now. I was going to handle making the buildings green; Patterson was going to handle marketing and tenants. It was a good match."

"Was?"

Chase shifted in her chair. "We'd had some disagreements about management. Nothing major, but enough that we both felt it was better to separate the business."

"And the reason you canceled the meeting?"

"Some paperwork that I'd been waiting on hadn't come through and we couldn't proceed without it." She glanced at Quimby. "Would you send Detective Huang the papers we were processing?"

"Shall I transfer them to Metta?"

"Yes, please." She leaned forward and picked up the cup from her desk.

The thin white porcelain caught Huang's eye. He subvocalized to Metta. "See what type of china that is."

In his VR glasses, she murmured, "Why?"

"It looks like the china from the murder scene," he subvocalized. He smiled at Chase. "How long has Quimby been with you?"

Chase nearly upset her teacup and laughed. "Detective. Quimby is right here. You can ask him."

"A year and a half, Detective." The AI inclined his head. "And if I may anticipate your next questions, I have a certified honesty vow and am sending the authentication to Metta. Yes. Mrs. Chase had a yoga appointment that morning and I can also provide her POV of the session via her VR unit. I will send that to Metta as well as

recordings of the hour before and after the yoga session so you may verify her whereabouts.”

Huang considered. He could get little else here without checking other details. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Chase, Quimby.”

Chase stood. “What? That’s all?”

“You’ve been very helpful, but there might be questions we want to ask you in the future, so please let me know before you go out of town.”

Metta nodded her head as well, said her goodbyes and disappeared from the desktop interface. Quimby saw them out of the building.

Metta hung in Huang’s glasses silently until they left the building. “Something’s not right.”

“I know.” He shook his head. “Once you know what the teacup is, will you let me know what china was used at the scene?”

She grimaced. “It will take awhile. I’ll have to get someone to bring it up from evidence so I can look at it. Sorry. Not in my memory.”

“Not your fault. Just get it to me when you can.”

Metta looked out from under her eyelashes. “Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly.” Even with the quote and the Mae West act, the tension still came through in her voice.

Huang pointed at the MAX as it pulled up. “Oh look. A streetcar. I wonder if it’s named Desire.”

In his ear, Metta giggled and the loosening of the strain in her face was worth the wait.

Huang leaned back in his chair and scrubbed his eyes with his fists. The paperwork seemed unending and yet nothing connected. Chase’s alibi checked out. True, she might have hired someone, but why have a meeting and then cancel it if that were the case? It just drew attention to her.

And if he were being truly honest with himself, Huang had wanted to find a lead to Metta’s disappearance. Delarosa had nothing. He ground his teeth at the futility of the day.

Metta appeared over his desktop, still wearing Mae West as her interface. “I can finish this report for you.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I generally avoid temptation unless I can’t resist it.”

Huang smiled at the quote, but it seemed too light for his mood. “It’ll help me focus.”

She nodded and morphed back to the face she had been made with, her “natural” face. Stripped of Mae West’s glamour, Metta seemed young and fragile. Her look was modeled on some Victorian ideal, large dark eyes and waves of hair swept up in a bun. “I understand, I could use a bit of that myself.”

He pulled up the first report and buried his head in the red tape of the department. Metta murmured occasionally to help him remember events, or to suggest clearer wording. Even so, his eyes began hooding over with drowsiness.

“Hey, Scott?” Amado appeared by his desk. He was always pale from too many daylight hours spent in the basement of the station tending the computer networks, but now his face seemed drawn with tension.

Huang ran his hand across his face, trying to wake up. “What’s up?”

Amado said, “I’d really like to talk to you about what happened when Metta was taken.”

“Sure.” He waited for Amado to continue.

“C’mon, let’s grab a beer and talk.”

Huang shook his head. “Not tonight, sorry. Mountain of paperwork.”

"It would mean a lot to me. I'm worried about her."

Which "her"—the one missing or the one watching Huang now? Huang worried about both. "That's understandable. What do you want to know?"

"Ah. I don't want to hang around here. Let's go out."

Huang looked down at the watch in the corner of his desk. Unless he called and said work was keeping him late, his mother would expect him home in an hour.

Giving her one more thing to worry about was not high on his list of priorities. On the other hand, Amado was being awfully insistent on talking, and seemed set against going into anything in the building. If he were an informant, Huang would think he had a piece of information he didn't trust to the system. But in this case, the system was Metta, and—what if he didn't trust Metta for some reason?

Metta would have to record anything they talked about, even if she didn't want to. Unless they went off duty and left the building. . . . "Sure. Yeah. Want to hit Wacky Joe's? Just give me a few minutes to wrap this up."

Amado fidgeted by his desk. "Yeah . . . sure. I'll meet you there."

Huang agreed and watched Amado walk out of the room. The moment the door shut behind him, Metta said, "Did he seem tense to you?"

"Yeah. . . . Can you think of anything he'd want to hide?"

"No." She shook her head. "I can't."

Huang could. He could think of a very good reason for Amado to be worried about the circumstances around Metta's abduction.

He groaned and looked at the clock. "I do need to get home to Ma though." He took his VR glasses out of his pocket and put them in his desk drawer.

"Scott?" She chewed her lower lip. "Will you take me home with you?"

He stopped with his hand to his earbud. "What's wrong?"

"I'd feel better if I came with you." She looked away. "You'll probably have to report this, but I'm afraid of my backup tonight and I want to be around someone who was with me at the last one. I'm afraid I won't remember today." She looked back at him. "I want one night of continuity. That's all."

He couldn't help noticing that she hadn't asked for the favor until after Amado had left. "We aren't supposed to take the mobile interface equipment out, unless we're on duty."

"It ain't no sin if you crack a few laws now and then, just so long as you don't break any."

"I'm going to have to take the Mae West database away from you."

She blushed again. "I like her, she was a witty woman. No one else plays with me like this." Metta looked at him as if she were going to say something more, then shook her head. "So, will you take me with you?"

He could set up an early interview tomorrow if anyone asked him justify tonight. He picked up her VR glasses and tucked them in his pocket. "Sure, Metta. Anything for you."

The interior of Wacky Joe's was clouded with smoke. It was stage smoke, meant to give it the feel of a dive bar from the last century, but it had the side effect of making the space very intimate. Amado had a booth to the side of the bar and already had a Negróni in front of him.

Huang ordered a single malt, Oban, neat, and settled across from Amado. "What's up?"

Amado shrugged and spun his drink on the table. "I just wanted to know what you saw. Morbid, right?"

"Not much. She used the surveillance camera to show me a view of her room, it was only up for a couple of seconds." He took a sip of the Oban. "You've got to be a better witness, since you actually saw them live."

Shaking his head, Amado said, "I only saw two. Wearing all black, with ski masks." His fingers drummed against the stem of his glass as if they were hungry for a manual interface. "You saw three, right?"

"Right."

"The other one must have been behind—" Amado cocked his head and looked at the pocket of Huang's jacket. "Is that a set of VR glasses?"

"Huh? Yeah. I've got an early call tomorrow."

Amado frowned. "Dude, you aren't supposed to have those out after hours."

"This isn't unusual."

Amado held up his hands and pushed back from the table. "I'm not getting mixed up in it."

Huang felt his face hold its last expression, mild interest, while his brain raced behind its mask. Something was not right. "Mixed up in what? I told you we have an early call tomorrow so I'm going straight there from home."

"She can see on those. I—" He shook his head. "Never mind. This was stupid anyway. I can read your reports, right? Thanks for coming. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Amado—" Huang broke off as Amado slipped out of the booth and dropped cash on the table. He walked quickly, but took a meandering path out of the bar.

The path took him through the blindspots of the bar's cameras. Huang grimaced. This did not look good.

Huang woke early the next morning to the sound of murmuring voices. Wrapping his robe around himself, he wandered down the hall to the living room. His mother was seated at the desktop in conversation with Metta. The resolution was not as clean as at work, but did little to diminish the soft beauty of the Chinese woman floating over the desktop.

They both stopped talking when he walked into the room. Metta turned partially toward him, but he stood outside the range of the single camera on the desktop.

"How long have you two been up?"

His mother smiled. *"I don't need much sleep and Metta has been kind enough to keep me company."*

How much trouble was he going to get into at work over this? *"She's supposed to be on duty, Ma."*

In flawless Mandarin, Metta said, *"I am on duty, Scott. But I'm also allowed to converse with civilians about non-police matters. Your honored mother has been very gracious to invite me in."*

He swallowed and walked around to the front of the camera. Was there any reason she couldn't make a social call? *"Then I'm sorry I never invited you to visit before."*

His mother looked at him and tsked. *"This is why you have no friends."* She stood up. "You. Go get dressed, not good to look like this." She gestured at his bathrobe. "Have guest in house. Show respect." She looked back at Metta and smiled, *"Besides, we still have much to talk about."*

Huang chuckled and headed for the bathroom. He paused in the doorway and looked back at his mother. She was having an animated conversation in Mandarin with Metta.

His mother had been so active before she'd broken her hip, and now the injury trapped her in his apartment away from her friends. He shook his head, watching her laugh at something Metta said. He needed to start calling home during the day more often.

In the steaming water of the shower, Huang tried to organize his thoughts. He turned his active cases over in his head. The Patterson was the most pressing. They needed to find Yates and no one had turned up anything about him. The man was completely off the grid.

Of the evidence remaining, they had the manner of death and Patterson's appointment with Chase. He needed to ask Metta to follow up on the provenance of the china table had been set with. See if that led anywhere. It was such a strange murder.

He got out of the shower and towed himself dry. With the water off, he could hear the murmur of his mother's conversation with Metta. Maybe meeting Metta would quiet some of his mother's fears, knowing that he had someone watching his back while he was on duty.

As he rooted through his closet for a clean shirt, he brushed past the formal Chinese silk suit his mother had given him several years ago. He had only worn it once or twice, to please her. He had felt like an imposter, wearing it when he had grown up so far from China. Even though his mother had taught him how to behave, and had ensured he was bilingual—"a great advantage in this economy"—he'd never completely felt like it was his culture. Was that anything like how Metta felt when she modified her interface for people? She was out there pretending to be Chinese to make his mother more comfortable. For him she aped the great starlets of the silver screen. For Delarosa she was a quiet, efficient secretary.

As he walked back to the living room, Metta stopped speaking and whispered something. His mother laughed. Rounding the corner, he saw his mother sitting demurely in front of the interface, smiling innocently at him.

He raised his eyebrows at this picture of decorum. "What?"

"Nothing. We have good talk."

The two women smiled at him, and Huang couldn't help feeling like he was outnumbered.

As soon as Huang shut the apartment door behind him, he put the VR glasses on and slid the ear bud into his ear. He looked at Metta to ask her what she'd been talking about with his mother and saw that she had her standard neutral interface again. "So you're not Chinese now?"

"Do you want me to be?"

"No. I want you to be yourself."

She blinked. "You mean this interface?"

"No. I mean . . ." What did he mean? "I mean I want you to be who you want to be, not pick an appearance to accommodate me or my mother."

"Scott, picking the right face for me is like picking the right tie for you. It affects how people view me, but it isn't me." She sighed. "I have emotions, I feel, but I'm not human, so asking me to 'look like myself' is a pointless request."

"I know."

"Why is this suddenly bothering you?"

"I don't know." He shrugged and walked down the hall. "I guess because you've never come over before. I don't see you off-duty often."

"Look at me."

Huang shifted his gaze to where she floated in his glasses. Her cheeks were pale, and a thin line furrowed her brow. "I like the fact you don't insist on the same interface every day. It's like wearing a uniform. Looking like a Chinese woman to meet your mother seemed like dressing up to me. I just picked the most appropriate clothes."

"And downloaded Mandarin Chinese?"

Her face colored. "Ah. Actually, I did that a while ago. I wanted to make sure it wouldn't give me unpleasant translation issues. Did I sound all right?"

"Like a native." He grinned. "It's better than mine."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"No, really. We moved here when I was little, so my Chinese still sounds like I'm a child."

"Maybe that's why your mother treats you like a little boy."

"Ha!" He rubbed the back of his neck. She might have something there. "What case were you working on, that you needed Chinese?"

She took a breath and hesitated.

Huang watched her, fascinated. Metta didn't need to breathe, but she used breath to indicate her emotions. Was it conscious, or an algorithm working below her conscious thought?

When she spoke again, she said, "One of my detectives is ethnic Chinese. It seemed polite to know the language."

Huang stopped in the hallway and stared at her. "You've known Chinese since we started working together and you've never mentioned it?"

"You never speak it at work. I haven't needed to use it till now."

He ran his hand through his hair and started walking again. "So . . . is there anything else, I mean, do you learn languages for anyone else?"

"I learned Icelandic for Sigmundson." She smiled, and her face softened. "I recite sagas while he's setting up his equipment."

They reached the closest MAX station and Huang clattered down the stairs to the platform.

"What's first today?" Metta asked.

"I'm back to thinking about motive. Who inherits the Patterson estate?"

"His sixteen-year-old son, but through a trust that Mrs. Patterson controls."

"Any idea what building he wanted to acquire next?"

"Give me a minute and I'll let you know."

Something nagged at Huang, but he couldn't put his finger on it. To distract himself, hoping the thought would spring into focus, he asked, "Did you have another backup at three A.M.?"

Metta nodded.

"How'd it go?"

"Fine. I remember everything since I woke up yesterday."

"That's good."

She shrugged. "The backup wasn't the problem, it's the fact that I am a backup. Instead of unbroken memory, I have a gap, so I feel like I'll shut down at the end of a backup." She tilted her head, "Think of it like a bad food experience. Even though you know it was a one-time thing your body still gets upset if you think about eating the same food again."

"Yeah. I've never gotten over my childhood carrot experience."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do tell."

"Carrot casserole in reverse. You can do the mental image yourself."

"The only carrots that interest me are the number of carats in a diamond."

"Does Mae West have an appropriate comment for every situation?"

"Not quite." She cocked her head. "I'm making a note you don't like carrots. I didn't know that."

"I clearly don't take you to dinner often enough."

"You've never taken me to dinner. And I have the answer to your last question."

Huang blinked, trying to remember what he had asked her. Right. The last acquisition Patterson had been making. "Which is?"

"The old Salvation Army Building, which is—huh. That's the building Yates was working on behind the Daily Grind." Her eyes narrowed in thought. "Chase owns it now."

Huang whistled. "Well, well . . . isn't that interesting. Now that's a nice connection, and it gives Patterson a motive for wanting Chase out of the picture, but not the other way around."



"Sorry to disappoint you, but Chase was happy to sell. Patterson met the offer on the table and the sale was moving forward."

"Why do all my avenues turn to dead ends?"

"I could search my databases for days and not have an answer to that one."

Huang boarded the MAX car as it pulled into the station. "Oh. Any word on the provenance of the china the table was set with?"

"I think you'll like this. The china on the roof was Mont Clair, by Lennox, and Chase's teacup was the same."

"Oooh. . . I do like that." He chewed the inside of his lip.

"I'll ask for a warrant to search Chase's to—"

Metta vanished from his view. Huang's heart raced. "Metta?"

Seconds of silence ticked by. Cursing, Huang pressed his hand against the glass as if he could hurry the MAX to the next station. Outside, a squad car dopplered past on its way to HQ.

"—see if she's missing any pieces."

Huang nearly dropped to his knees with relief as Metta finished her sentence where she had left off. She had replaced her neutral face with Mae West again, but in full color and three-D.

Not caring that he looked like a madman, Huang said aloud, "What the hell was that?"

"What?" A line creased her brow.

"You went away for a minute and then you came back."

"No, I. . . ." Her face paled. "Oh. Something is very wrong."

His heart pounded. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I feel strange."

Huang reached out, as if his hand could touch the face floating in his vision. He caught sight of his watch. 9:01. His breath stopped in his chest. "Did you just do a backup?"

Her luminous eyes turned to him. Had the real Mae West's eyes ever been that blue? "Yes."

"Did you go down across the board, or just with me?"

"System wide. Scott?" She licked her lips. "What do I look like?"

The air seemed to stifle him. "Mae West. Colorized. 3-D."

She pulled in a deep breath and looked away from him. "I need you to come into the station."

Huang felt like cold water was dumped down his spine. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. During the ride to the station, she wouldn't answer his questions, but floated, practically mute, in the corner of his vision as if she had pressed as far to the side of the VR glasses as she could.

When the MAX pulled into the station, Metta raised her eyes, still not meeting his. "Report to the chief. I'll see you there."

She winked out of sight as he ran up the steps, but her surveillance cameras watched him. What had happened?

As he crossed the threshold of the station, Banks careened down the hall toward him. "Huang! In my office, now." The chief turned on his heel.

Huang had to jog to catch up with him, heart pounding. As he passed through the station, he caught a glimpse of an officer, talking to Mae West. Further on, he saw another officer, with the same Mae West interface for Metta.

Huang stopped and leaned through a department door. Over every desktop interface, Mae West floated in full living color.

As Huang stared at the matched heads, they turned, not quite in unison, in his direction. Banks came back and stood so close his breath steamed hot against Huang's cheek. "Move it."

Huang jumped and followed the chief down the hall. "What happened to her?"

"That's why you're here."

Inside the office, Amado, Delarosa and Metta waited for Huang. Metta, who still looked like Mae West, wouldn't meet his gaze. She somehow made the jaded face seem vulnerable and uncertain.

Banks pointed to a chair flanked by Delarosa and Amado. "Sit." He flung himself into the seat behind his desk. The wood creaked as he leaned forward to glower at Huang.

Huang sank into the chair, glancing at the others. Amado wore VR glasses and his lips twitched as he subvocalized. Delarosa tapped a pencil on a pad of paper, his mouth a tight, compressed line.

Huang held his questions. He wouldn't be the one who drove this discussion. Resting his hands on his knees, he ran scales in his mind and focused on his breathing.

Amado shifted once and Banks shook his head. Huang waited, with a bead of sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

He almost flinched when Delarosa finally spoke. "Where were you at three A.M. this morning?"

"Asleep. At home."

"Who was with you?"

"I sleep alone."

"Is there anyone who can verify you were there?"

"My mother was home." He looked at Metta. "So was Metta."

Amado leaned forward again, but Banks held a finger up to stop him.

Delarosa scribbled something on his pad. "Why did you take the interface equipment home last night?"

Huang turned slightly in his chair to face Delarosa, wondering what Amado had told him. "I had an early call and she asked me to."

He raised his eyebrows. "Why would she do that?"

Huang hesitated.

"It's all right, Huang." Metta raised her eyes and turned to Delarosa. "I was afraid; I suggested we schedule an early morning call so he had a reasonable justification for taking the equipment out."

Amado asked, "What were you afraid of?"

She shrugged the ample bosom of Mae West. "I guess you could say I was afraid of the dark."

"What the hell does that mean?" Delarosa scowled. "You're a computer with thousands of cameras. It's never dark."

Fixing him with her gaze, she said, "I'm designed to have continuous consciousness. I don't sleep. Ever. But, after the assailants took Metta Prime, Amado restarted me from a backup. The practical side effect of that is, from my perspective, I lost consciousness for over twenty-four hours. Imagine something routine in your life, like brushing your teeth. Nothing bad has ever happened; you barely think about it except as part of your routine. How would you feel if you blacked out while brushing your teeth?" She tilted her head to the side. "Wouldn't you have some hesitation about the toothbrush, even though you knew it had nothing to do with what had happened to you?"

Delarosa shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "You were kidnapped, it's understandable—"

"I wasn't." Metta glared at him. "It's important you understand that. I—the one you are talking to—was not kidnapped; I have no trauma or even memory of the event. What upsets me is the memory loss, and that's the only thing I have experienced." She turned to Huang. "That's why I asked them to bring you in."

He blinked, trying to make sense of what she was saying. "I don't understand."

"Someone, probably Metta Prime, sent me a Trojan horse that contained this."

Amado said, "We still don't know that. The crash might be related to the new chassis. I don't see any signs of tampering with your code."

She gestured to her face. "I crashed and I can't manifest any other interface. What do you call that?"

Huang went still. "And you think it happened at my house last night?"

Metta looked away. "It's a possibility."

"Was I the only officer you went home with last night?"

"No—"

"Stop it." Delarosa leaned forward and jabbed his pencil at Huang. "You're here to answer questions, not ask them."

Huang ran his hand through his hair. "So ask."

Delarosa frowned. "According to Metta's bandwidth reports, she maintained an active connection to your house all night. What did you have her working on?"

"Why aren't you asking her this? I was asleep."

"Answer me."

"I don't know. My mother sometimes wakes up during the night, maybe she was talking with Metta."

Delarosa wrote something down on his note pad.

"No." Huang raised his hands and looked at the chief. "You can't bring my mother in. Please."

Banks stared at Huang impassively.

Huang looked to Metta for help. "C'mon, you know my mother had nothing to do with this. What about at Chase's apartment? You logged in there."

Amado cleared his throat. "I thought about that, but it seems like it's related to backing up, so the last backup is a more reasonable entry point. Besides . . ." His voice trailed away and he looked at Delarosa nervously.

Delarosa's mouth turned down at the corners. "Go ahead and spill everything."

Huang knew what Amado had been about to say. "Besides, Mae West is an interface Metta created for me."

She nodded. "Did Metta Prime colorize the West interface during the dark period?"

Huang shook his head. "The mono-v face you had on yesterday is the one I last saw you—her wearing."

Banks leaned back in the chair. "So the question is . . . if Metta Prime is trying to send a message, what does Mae West have to do with anything?"

Huang inhaled and held the breath while he thought. "Is it possible her kidnapping is related to the case I was working on when she was taken?"

"Tell us more about that." Delarosa lifted his pad of paper and poised his pencil over it.

Amado shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. I mean, the Mae West thing, maybe, but not today's crash."

Metta shook her head. "Not necessarily. My Prime might be dealing with an invasive virus." She stopped and sighed. "For that matter, we don't know how deeply I might be infected."

"Don't you have firewalls and stuff?" Huang asked.

"I have subroutines, which handle basic things, but a signature from Metta Prime would look the same as a signature from me." Metta paused. "I think we should consider replacing me."

"Metta!" Amado nearly jumped out of his seat. "I can run any tests you want. You don't need to do that."

She rolled her eyes. "Amado, you're a dear, but you're out of your depth."

He sputtered, "I've been taking care of you for years."

"No. You've been taking care of Metta Prime for years. As soon as you booted me from the backup, I diverged from her. I mean, let's be realistic here. . . . Do you know any AI who's a backup?"

Banks looked sharply at Amado. "I thought you said this was a procedure that had been done before."

Amado ran his hands through his hair and looked at the floor. "AIs have been revived from backup before."

"But not while the Prime was living." Metta glared at him. "I should not be here. But for the moment I am, so let's make use of that, shall we?" She turned to Delarosa. "I think it's likely the Patterson case is in some way connected, or Metta Prime would have fixed on a different interface."

"Can we even trust your judgments? You said you were infected with a virus."

Amado said, "I ran a scan on her right after her crash, I don't see anything wrong besides her interface."

"And here I thought I looked pretty." She turned the corners of her mouth down. "Chief. Please, we only have five hours until my next backup. I'm as certain as I can be; Huang saw something during my dark period related to this case. It will be something not in his reports, because it didn't seem important. I want him and Delarosa to compare notes and work these cases together."

Banks glared at Metta. His jaw worked subtly as he subvocalized to her. Finally, the chief nodded and turned to Delarosa. "Huang's working with you on this. Metta is right. There must be something that happened, between her Prime's last backup and when she was taken, that Huang knows. So I want you two to work together on her disappearance and the Patterson murder."

Delarosa opened his mouth, scowling.

Banks held up his hand. "I mean it."

"Fine." Delarosa drew a hard line through something on his pad.

"Now get out of here." Banks pointed at the door.

Huang followed Delarosa to his desk, head reeling from the last half hour. Metta waited for them, floating in perfect imitation of Mae West over Delarosa's desktop interface.

"Here." Delarosa sat down and tossed him a file folder of hard copies. "Yours are electronic, aren't they?"

Huang nodded. "I'll key them over to your desktop."

Metta said, "Delarosa prefers hard copies so I'm printing transcripts of everything we've talked about today."

"That'll kill a lot of trees."

Delarosa glowered. "Here's the deal. I don't make comments on your preferences. You don't make them on mine. Fair?"

"Fair. Thanks." He sat down and started leafing through the papers Delarosa had handed him.

Huang got frustrated reading Delarosa's reports, because he seemed to be ignoring a whole line of questioning about how Metta worked, and what that might have to do with the case. His notes were terse almost to the point of incomprehensibility.

During Metta's abduction, three armed men had entered the building without being seen. Amado saw two in a corridor, but was unable to identify them. In fact, the clearest description of the men was the one Huang had provided.

Although an inside job was possible, the men had also disabled cameras all along the route out of the building. This suggested a highly organized plan carried out by several people who knew the system very well. Better, in fact, than any of the officers currently working at the station. The only one with sufficient knowledge was

Amado, but he was among those injured in the attack. "Metta? I don't see it in Delarosa's report; did you do a size analysis of the men I reported seeing?"

"It was inconclusive."

"Would you humor me? Make blank composites and compare that against people in the department who could have been in the station at the time of your Prime's abduction."

"I've run profiles on everyone in the station, no one has the know-how to trick my cameras."

"Except Amado."

She sighed. "Except Amado. Huang, even if I didn't know him well, he has no motive. It's most likely to be an outside job."

"Will you show me the groups anyway?"

"Yes." On his VR glasses, three men's silhouettes appeared in blue. "These are the weights and heights you reported. Of the people who could have been at the station, these are the ones who fit that body type." A short list of names scrolled past his eyes.

"Why are you so resistant to this?"

She pulled her mouth into a straight line. "Look at the names. Fitzgerald and Amado are on that list. I have one eyewitness, you, who didn't see anything long enough to make a positive ID. It's extremely unreliable testimony."

"Fine." He let the air out of his lungs, staring at Delarosa's report.

"It's a good idea, but I've already gone down that path."

Huang closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "Why me? If it's related to the Patterson case, why not Griggs?"

"I don't know."

"Okay . . . let's go at this from the other end. Why Diamond Lil? Why not—" Huang broke off, his mouth open. He suddenly remembered the plot of the movie.

Metta stared at him. "Why is your pulse spiking?"

"This is crazy, I know, but on Tuesday when you showed me Diamond Lil you said you watched the movie. Do you remember the plot?"

Her eyes shifted to the left. "Lady Lou (Mae West) works in the 1890s saloon of Gus Jordan (Noah Beery, Sr.). Gus traffics in white slavery and runs a counterfeiting ring. Next door to the bar is a city mission. . . ." Her gaze widened and snapped back to Huang. "The old Salvation Army building—you think they have my Prime there."

"Who owns it?"

She nodded slowly. "Magdalena Chase."

"And Patterson wanted to buy it. And the witness to the murder was working there. There's got to be a connection. Get me a warrant to search that building."

"I've sent the request in, but it's a line of conjecture. I don't know that I can get you one."

"I need to talk to Delarosa." He hurried across the room and stopped by the older detective's desk.

Delarosa looked up, glaring. "What?"

Huang quickly related his conversation with Metta about the film. When he finished Delarosa snorted heavily. "That's pretty thin."

"I know, but there has to be some reason she settled on Diamond Lil. I don't understand the link, but there has to be a connection."

"I think you're reading too much into this." Delarosa slid a page across the table. "The fact that both crimes used a .38 is the more likely link. We need to focus on finding the murder weapon."

"Fine. When the warrant comes in, I'll check it out without you." Huang stalked back to his desk and grabbed his coat. He couldn't search the place, but he could damn well keep an eye on it.

Huang leaned against the wall and nursed the cup of coffee he'd picked up at the Daily Grind. According to the counter girl, Joe Yates had not been in for his usual lowfat double-shot latte that morning. It was nearly three o'clock, so it was unlikely that Yates would show at all. Huang stared at the old Salvation Army building across the street. "So . . . I'm thinking that maybe whoever killed Patterson took your Prime to cover up the crime. And they're looking for or have already found Yates."

Metta frowned. "Wouldn't it be easier to just make it look like an accident in the first place? Or make sure we never found the body?"

"Maybe Yates surprised them and they weren't expecting to be caught."

"Possible. We won't know until we find him."

Huang took another sip of his coffee. "Any word on the warrant?"

"How many times are you going to ask me?" Metta shook her head. "I'll let you know when I have it. Look, there's a traffic camera at the end of this street so I can keep an eye on the area while we do something useful."

"I don't mind waiting."

She wrinkled her nose. "I know. But I want to see the Patterson scene since I—"

"Since you blacked out while you were there." Huang turned and walked back to the Daily Grind building.

"Exactly. I'm hoping that something will tell me what's in that missing memory."

The lobby of the Daily Grind looked the way he remembered it, with potted plants hiding in the corners. Huang headed for the stairs.

"Oh, hang on." Metta stopped him. "The elevator is working today."

"Thank god. I was not looking forward to climbing those stairs again." Huang wheeled around and pushed the elevator button.

"Wimp."

"I'm going to go to the gym." He watched the numbers descend to meet him. "Really."

"A man can be short and dumpy and getting bald, but if he has fire, women will like him."

"Hey!" He ran a hand through his hair, checking.

Metta laughed, "It's a Mae West quote. Honestly, Scott."

Sheepish, he jerked his hand out of his hair. "I knew that." Huang got into the elevator and reached for the roof button.

"Scott, will you start in the hallway upstairs?"

"Sure." He pressed the button for the tenth floor and they rode the elevator in silence. When the door opened, he stepped out into the soft glow of the wood wainscoting. "Remember this?"

Metta shivered. "I don't like this place."

"Are you okay?"

"My memory ends here."

He had not thought this all the way through. What if he caused her to crash? "We can go back."

"No." Mae West's eyes glittered dangerously. "I need to know what things I'm missing."

The hall seemed longer than it had before. When he climbed the stairs to the landing, the lemon scent was completely gone. "There was a strong lemon odor here, as though someone had cleaned recently."

"Will you give me a new three-sixty?"

Huang spun on his heels obediently. Then he stood and turned slowly, letting Metta see the whole room.

"All right. Let's go to the roof."

Outside Huang walked across the grass roof to the wireframe table. He showed



her where the wheelchair had been and the spot where he'd found the screw and the stained grass.

"Scott?" Metta looked at him with wide, serious eyes out of keeping with Mae West's face. "May I ask you to do something morbid?"

He stopped in the middle of the roof. "What is it?"

"Will you replay what you did when I—when they took the original me, my Prime? So I can, so I can pretend I remember it."

His breath seemed locked in his throat. He glanced at the time. 2:55. "Are you sure? Your backup . . ."

"That's why. Please?"

He swallowed heavily and whispered. "I can do that."

He walked back toward the center and gestured at it with his hand so she could see. "Griggs was here, fingerprinting the wheelchair."

He tried to remember, not wanting to. "I had just asked you why the elevator was down."

She broke in. "Just act it out. I know it's weird, but I have never felt lost like this. I just want to fill in the blanks."

He swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Metta?" he subvocalized, "How long has the elevator in this building been down?"

He waited for a moment, not looking at her. "Then you said you'd been trying to check on that since we got here, but couldn't reach the building manager. Then you froze, and you said—"

Metta whispered, "Shots fired." Her voice was an imagined memory. "Officer down."

Huang froze, as if he were listening for gunfire in their vicinity again. He pointed to where Griggs had been. "Griggs stood up and yelled your name."

Metta nodded, the color fading from her rouged cheeks until it looked as though she would return to black and white. She whispered, "Three armed subjects in chasis room. The assailants are armed, I repeat—Amado! Two officers down."

As he remembered, Huang turned on his heel and sprinted back across the roof. "Metta, can you give a visual?" The memory of fear grabbed him again. "Metta, answer me. Who's there? Can you give a visual?"

Still running he said, "You showed me an image, but it was fast. You screamed and froze, then you vanished." He put his hand on the door. "There was only silence after that."

"Thank you." The husky voice she affected as Mae West seemed thick with emotion. "I'd like to go down now."

He walked across the grass roof, shooting glances at her as he went. Cars hummed by on the interstate and a breeze kicked a dried leaf across his path. Huang pulled open the door of the roof access and stepped onto the small landing containing the elevator. His heels clicked on the linoleum.

Metta looked up and heaved a sigh of relief and beamed. "In a happy turn of events . . . I just found a judge to give you a warrant."

"Great. Can you get me some backup. I mean—You know."

"It's not a dirty word, Scott. And yes. I have people on the way."

"Did you tell Delarosa we've got it?"

"He's headed to Patterson's office."

It figured he wouldn't be interested. "There's not a chance Patterson's office is in the old Salvation Army building, is there?"

Metta shook her head. "I'd have mentioned it—"

Her image froze, flickered and vanished.

Huang gasped. He didn't need the clock to tell him it was 3:00. What if she didn't come back this time?

“—if it were.” Her face paled. “It happened again, didn’t it?”

She still looked like Mae West. The grand dame of silver screen stared back at Huang, in full color, but with a layer of fear he had never seen.

“It was a minute, like last time.”

She closed her eyes. “Damn.”

“What’s different this time?”

Her eyes flashed open. “Nothing I can tell. I still look like the finest gal that ever walked the streets.”

“That you do, sweetheart.” He crumpled his coffee cup and threw it into the garbage can by the elevator. “What’s the ETA?”

“First car should be just a block away.”

“Great.” Huang pushed the down button. “Will you tell them to guard the exits on the north side?”

“Will do. I’ll get a perimeter established with first responders and then send you a team to search the building.”

The door dinged open and Huang stepped inside. He stood still so the door almost caught his coat as it slid shut.

“I’ll be damned. It’s that lemon smell again.”

“Help me out, Scott.” Metta watched him carefully. “How common is this scent you’re talking about?”

“It’s fairly common in cleaning products, but I don’t usually smell it in concentrations unless someone has just cleaned.” A picture of his mother scrubbing the furniture flashed through his mind. “It’s strange that it wasn’t here before.” He snorted. “And it’s strong.”

He spun in a circle in the tiny elevator. A chair from the lobby stood in the corner. Huang tilted his head back to look at the access hatch. It was not seated neatly in its frame. He climbed onto the chair and subvocalized, “Metta, can you find out why the elevator was out of service on Tuesday?”

“I’m working on it, but the manager says he never knew it was out of order, and never put in a service call to get it fixed.”

He reached up and pushed on the access panel. It rose easily, letting in a stronger draft of the lemony fragrance. Without needing to be asked, Huang pulled off Metta’s eSpy and lifted the small lens into the space above the elevator. He turned it slowly as Metta played the images on his glasses. A bundle of clothing lay close to the edge of the hatch. They were dark gray and splotted with blood. The corner of a name badge showed the letters “Yat.”

Huang stifled a curse and turned the small camera further. A hand flashed across his vision and grabbed Huang’s forearm, pinning it to the edge of the access hatch.

Metta’s eSpy dropped out of his hand and bounced across the roof of the elevator, flashing vertiginous images on his glasses. He jerked his hand free as the eSpy fell over the edge of the elevator. He almost fell as the image spun out of control until Metta cut the feed to his glasses.

Huang jumped off the chair and pulled his gun out, aiming at the opening.

Metta whispered, “Backup is on the way.”

“Mr. Yates!” He shouted upward. “We just want to ask you a few questions.”

He could hear murmuring above.

Metta turned up the gain in his earbud so he could hear the fluid voice. She whispered, “I think that’s Rwandan.”

“What’s he saying?”

“I’m downloading a translator, it will be a minute.”

Raising his voice again, Huang said, “Mr. Yates. You have to come down sometime. Let’s make it easy and come quietly now.”

He could hear a rustle of fabric. A hoarse voice spoke out of the darkness. "You won't shoot me?"

"No, sir." He held the gun aimed at the hole. "But I need you to come down."

"You've got a gun pointing at me."

"Yes sir, I do. I won't use it unless you give me a reason to. You won't do that, will you?"

"Maybe you think I already have."

"I don't think anything yet, except you're trapped and scared. I don't want to hurt you. I just want you to come down."

There was a long silence and more murmuring prayers. "All right." The ceiling creaked as he slid closer to the opening. "I'm coming down."

"The chair's right beneath the opening."

A slender leg appeared in navy blue sweat pants. Another appeared and Yates quickly lowered himself to the chair. The track suit he wore was rumpled as if he'd slept in it. His right hand had been crudely bandaged with what looked like a linen napkin.

"I'm going to check for weapons." Huang pushed him against the wall a little harder than necessary to remind Yates that grabbing an officer was never acceptable. Yates stood listlessly while Huang patted him down, almost as if he had fallen asleep standing up. Nothing. It would have been easier if he were packing a .38.

"He's clean." Huang told Metta. He hit the button for the lobby. "Mr. Yates, we're going to take you downtown to ask you some questions."

Yates nodded his head miserably. "I know. I was trying to help and then. . . ." He waved his bandaged hand helplessly, "it all went wrong."

Huang shared a look with Metta. Went wrong? "What went wrong?"

Yates rubbed his long slender fingers over his short hair. "It's complicated."

Metta whispered, "I translated his prayer. He was asking why he was being punished for trying to help a dying man."

Huang led Yates off the elevator, still subvocalizing to Metta. "That could still mean he killed Patterson."

"True. There are no withholding taxes on the wages of sin." Metta shook her head and grimaced. "What about the warrant for the old Salvation Army building?"

Huang squeezed his eyes shut, weighing his options. "Can one of the uniforms take Yates downtown?"

"I'll have someone meet you at the door and I'll get Griggs to collect the clothes from the elevator."

Huang spied the open door to the Daily Grind. "Have them meet me in the coffee shop. Mr. Yates hasn't had his lowfat double-shot latte today."

"You are such a softy."

"I know." He grinned. "That's why you like me."

It took another fifteen minutes to transfer Yates. Huang strapped on his flak jacket and headed inside the Salvation Army building with a small team.

"Okay boys, subvocalize from here on." Metta's voice was neutral and indicated that she was addressing all of the officers present. She guided them through the building, clearing each room as they went before leading them up to the next floor. For the most part, the building was empty and waiting for renovation. One room showed signs of a squatter, but the rest had the standard discards of old offices—partition walls, old file folders, and layers of dust. On the fourth floor, Metta narrowed her eyes and highlighted tracks in the carpet that looked as though someone had dragged a heavy handtruck down the hall recently. The tracks led back to a door three-quarters of the way down the hall.

Huang pulled out his gun and sidled down the hall. The other officers positioned themselves ready to cover him.

The door was ajar about an inch. Metta said, "I don't hear anything inside."

Huang took a breath and knocked on the door. "Police. Open up."

Silence.

He pushed the door open.

The room held a desk and a chair. Next to the desk, the carpet contained a rectangular impression as if something heavy had sat on it recently.

"Take a look." Metta opened a screen in Huang's VR glasses with an infrared view of the room, using another officer's eSpies for better resolution. In the artificial colors of the infrared, he could see the faint glow of warmth in the rectangle.

"That's the right size to be a chassis." Metta wiped the image from his glasses and reappeared. "The men downstairs are on alert, but I think we're too late."

Huang let out the breath he had been holding. "I'm sorry—" He stopped with his mouth open. He sniffed the air.

"Scott, what is it?"

He turned slowly, his nose raised. "Lemon Pledge. It's fainter than the other times, but still noticeable."

Metta said, "CSI is on their way. Seal the room, and don't touch anything."

They went back into the hall to wait. Huang felt as if he were moving underwater, it took so much effort to even breathe. He subvocalized, "I'm sorry, Metta."

"Scott." She looked at him closely. "You have nothing to be sorry about."

"If I had come in when I got the warrant . . ."

She shook her head. "The heat signature is cooler than that. I'd guess we missed them by about fifteen to twenty minutes."

Huang glanced at his watch. 3:25. "How long does it take to move you?"

"If you know what you're doing it's fast."

Huang looked at the officers waiting in the hall. "Let's go ahead and search the whole building. Maybe they didn't move far."

"Unlikely." Metta shifted her eyes up and to the left. "They'll have another place to store her, but knowing this one means I can start running numbers to see if I can come up with other likely places."

"The question now is: What tipped them off?"

Metta compressed her lips. "I don't like the probable answers."

He helped the team finish sweeping the building, but they found no other obvious evidence of Metta Prime's presence. As soon as he could turn the scene over to Griggs, he headed back to the station to interview Yates. Metta was silent for much of the ride and almost looked as if she would be happier somewhere else. Her brooding was so dark, Huang finally said, "If you want to tune out, I don't mind."

"Hmm? No, I'm fine here."

"You don't have to watch me ride the MAX; you've got a lot of other things on your mind."

"I've got a lot of mind to deal with things." She pursed her lips. "Which is part of what I'm thinking about. What happened that all the multi-tasking parts of myself reacted as one."

"Was it the shock of finding men inside the station?"

"I don't know. I have no idea how they got in. I could see them evading one camera, but not all of them."

"What if—" Huang stopped. She would never go for this, but she was looking at him expectantly, so he filled the silence. "When you were talking to Amado, right after you woke up, you mentioned playing hide and seek. . . . Do you really?"

"Yes . . . and No, I see where you're going with this, but it's not that simple. When we play, I stop monitoring the cameras. The public cameras, like the ones that identify people coming into the building, are still captured and processed, but they go into my unconscious banks. I still scan people, but I don't pay attention to what I'm doing, so keeping them out is as reflexive as a sneeze. Does that make any sense?"

"So, it's likely the people who took you were people who belonged in the station. Right?"

"You're back to thinking it was an inside job."

Huang got off the MAX and walked up the steps of the station. "Tell me at what point you first scan me."

He was halfway up the steps, when Metta said, "Now. My first camera just tagged you. But, unless you flag warnings in the A.S., I don't start paying attention till you cross the threshold, and even then, only if you're someone I'm looking forward to seeing."

Huang ignored the people passing him on the steps. "Will you do something for me?" "I'll try anything once, twice if I like it, three times to make sure."

"Then play hide and seek with me."

"You think Amado was involved."

Huang wished he could hide from her gaze. He wasn't sure what he thought. "I wonder if someone knew about your games and took advantage of them."

"How would they have known?"

"I don't know." Unless Amado was involved, which Metta seemed unable to acknowledge as a possibility. "What's the shortest route to the chassis room?"

She brought a map up on his VR glasses. "Go to the south side of the building and enter through the garage."

Huang headed around the building. "Did Delarosa do this?"

"He doesn't know about our hide and seek games."

"You didn't tell him?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with the case."

"Metta! How can you think turning your cameras off is unrelated?"

"Because the thieves couldn't have known or counted on it. The chance of us playing a game at the exact moment they decided to break in is extremely unlikely."

What if Metta had been tampered with so she couldn't consider Amado as a suspect?

As he entered the garage, the acrid smell of electricity crackled around him. An evidence truck sat up on blocks, with a mechanic under it. Rows of filing cabinets, filled with parts, lined the walls.

Metta said, "I'd have noticed you when you came through the garage doors."

Huang nodded and backed up. "Let me know when I'm off the radar."

About ten feet outside the garage door, Metta said, "Now."

"All right." Huang straightened his shoulders. "Show me the route again."

Metta flashed the map on his VR glasses. "You didn't ask, but here are the cameras that were disabled." A row of red dots appeared along the line that she recommended as the fastest route. Two green dots appeared scattered on the route. "These are the officers who went down."

"How hard is it to disable a camera?"

"Depends. These guys used a wire cutter, so, in theory, they could have cut the cable as they passed underneath."

"Right. Let's see how far I can get in a hundred seconds."

Her face set and resolute, Metta closed her eyes. "Ready? Go."

Huang started walking. They would have walked, surely, or other officers would have noticed them. As he walked, Metta counted backward, "100, 99, 98, 97. . ."

The first camera he passed hung lifeless from the ceiling. Why did they cut the cables, if they were planning on taking Metta's chassis? Was it so they would have a

safe way out if something went wrong? He fought the urge to run down the hall as Metta continued to count. "... 87, 86, 85 ..."

The men Amado saw wore masks, and they had worn masks in the image Metta sent Huang. "... 63, 62, 61. ..." He rounded the corner and entered the hall where Fitzgerald had been shot.

He reached the end of the hall without seeing other officers. "... 53, 52, 51. ..."

He opened the door to the stairs and ran down them. The chances of unexpectedly seeing someone else on the stairs were slim. The suspects could have hurried here. He looked at the spot where Amado had been found. Had they put the masks on in the stairs, or after they shot Fitzgerald?

He opened the door to the hall outside the chassis room. "... 42, 41, 40. ..." He heard footsteps at the other end of the hall, and saw Banks walking away from him. Huang swallowed, walking briskly down the hall to the chassis room.

"... 30, 29, 28. ..." Huang opened the chassis room door and stepped in. Amado looked up, grinning. He put one finger to his lips. In his ear Metta said, "... 18, 17, 16. ..."

Huang crossed the room and put his hand on her chassis. It was warm and smooth to the touch. A faint vibration stirred through his fingertips and the sense of life inside the box made the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

"I'm here."

Her voice stopped counting and the cameras on her chassis snapped into life. Her interface suddenly focused on him, with her face gone pale. "Those who are easily shocked should be shocked more often."

"Sorry, sweetheart."

She looked at his hand resting on her chassis. "Go right ahead. I don't mind if you get familiar. ..."

Huang colored and jerked his hand away from her. He turned around to face Amado. "I thought you'd be in your office."

Metta smiled at him. "I told him what you were trying to do. What was the trip like from your POV?"

"I didn't see anyone, except for the chief walking away."

"Here's what I'm thinking," Metta said. "It seems likely the suspects used that route to get to my chassis room. The fact that they killed Fitzgerald indicates, to me, that they were people whose presence in those corridors was inappropriate. In other words, they thought Fitzgerald would have known from looking at them that they were in the wrong place."

"You don't think they were just worried about being recognized?"

She shook her head. "If it were an inside job, they could have relied on being recognizable to avoid suspicion while the crime was in progress. Once they took my Prime, they would have needed to mask themselves on the way out, but not on the way in."

Huang thought about that. "What if some of them were hired guns and some were insiders?"

"Possible." She said aloud, then she whispered in Huang's ear, "You're still having the same thought, aren't you?"

"Yes," he subvocalized. Turning to Amado, he said, "Is it possible someone could do something to Metta so she was unable to suspect them of a crime?"

Amado lifted his head. "Are you accusing me?"

"Why would you assume I meant you?"

"Because I'm her wrangler. There isn't anyone else here who could."

Huang held up his hands. "Look. I'm just asking questions. Is it possible?"

"Theoretically? Yes. But someone would have to have her exact ID and there's no way to get that without having the AI in your possession. So you're back to me again."



"What about her Prime?"

Amado stopped with his mouth open. "Yeah . . . yeah. But—Shit. Is that possible?"

"What?"

"Well, look. It would only work in a case like this, where there was a living Prime and a backup, because their signature is the same. So what if that was the point?"

Metta shook her head. "No one could have known you would reboot me from a backup. It's unprecedented."

"What if they knew Amado would reboot you?"

Metta looked at him as if she'd never seen him before. "Scott. They couldn't have known Amado would reboot me. Hope? Yes, but it's more common to get a clean system in if something compromises the original. The backups are just for actual damage. My Prime was stolen, not damaged."

Huang straightened his shoulders and took a breath. "You're right, Metta. Of course they couldn't have been sure."

Metta scowled in his glasses. "Don't patronize me, Scott. I can tell you don't agree with me."

Huang weighed his options. "Look. You guys know more about this than I do. I was just asking questions, trying to understand."

"Give a man a free hand and he'll try to put it all over you." Metta sighed in a breathy Mae West voice. "Scott, you've got Yates upstairs in the interrogation room. We should get up there."

"Yeah. Thanks for your time, Amado." As he opened the door, Huang paused. "One more thing. Did you play hide and seek with Metta during her dark period?"

Amado stared at him for a moment. "Are you asking me to answer as a witness or a suspect?"

"I don't know. I want to find her. Do you?"

Amado pulled back as if Huang had slapped him. "What do you think?"

"Depends. Did you play hide and seek with her?"

Amado looked away from Huang. Metta watched them with her lips parted. The breath escaped from Amado. "Yeah. I've been worried about it."

"Why?"

Amado squirmed in his seat. "You'll have to tell the chief."

"Tell him what?"

"I have a webcam in my office. And I keep a blog." He slid a hand into his hair, twisting the tendrils into gravity-defying forms. "I've got Metta's interface placed so she can't see either the camera or my PC. I'm careful about keeping identifying details off the blog, but I can't help wondering if someone used it to time the break-in."

Blood pounded in Huang's ears. "And you haven't gone to the chief about this?"

"I know, I know." Amado leaned forward in his seat and put his face in his hands. "It's against so many rules, I've been afraid of being fired."

"Why are you telling me now?"

"I wanted to the other night, but you had her with you and . . . I didn't. I was scared, but I'm not stupid enough to lie. Besides . . . you care about her, too. To a lot of the guys, she's a tool, or at best, a pet."

"Had you discussed rebooting her from a backup with anyone?"

"Huh?" Amado looked up. "I mean, yeah, everyone in the industry talks about it."

"Anyone specific?"

Amado's shoulders sagged. "There was a thread of comments on my tagboard about her. I can get you a list of the handles, but it won't do much good. I don't require registration, so their profiles will mostly be anonymous."

"I'd like to read the tagboard anyway. Anyone else?"

"What? Do you want a list of all of my computer friends? For crying out loud, I

went to MIT. Everyone I know talks about this." His jaw dropped as Huang stared at him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm not."

Wrapping his hands in his hair, Amado pulled it straight up and groaned. "Fine."

"Thanks." Was there any way to tell if Amado was lying, or if he had made up the blog as a bizarre sort of alibi? The blog made a case for "it could be anybody," but Huang had trouble buying it. The coincidence seemed too great.

On the other hand, Amado and Metta had been playing hide and seek for ages; someone could have seen the chance and planned for it. His thoughts backed up. How long had they been playing hide and seek? He tried to remember the first time he had seen Amado ducking under surveillance cameras and sneaking into Metta's blind spots. Was it a standard AI game, or had Amado suggested it?

He made a mental note to do a search to see if other AIs played it. "I'd like to get that list now."

Amado hesitated. "My office is sort of a mess."

Huang raised his eyebrows at the same time as Metta cleared her throat. Amado turned red. "Sorry. Yeah. Don't know what I was thinking. Come on."

His office hid under piles of cables and random computer parts. The funk of old soy sauce hung in the air. Amado sat down at his desk and shoved a memory stick into his computer. As Huang came around the desk to watch him copy the files, Metta shook her head in dismay. "That little sneak. Look at that."

"What?" Huang took a step closer, ready to stop Amado from erasing the files.

"The camera. I can't believe he was doing that."

The desktop computer chirruped and Amado pulled the stick free. "Here you go." His arm brushed a can on his desk and it tipped off. The lid came free as it hit the carpet, filling the room with the scent of lemons.

"Bother." Amado fumbled for the can, hands slipping in the reddish gel.

"What is that?" Huang barely kept the tension out of his voice.

"My degreaser." He shook his head. "At least things will be oil-free."

Metta whispered, "What is it, Scott? Your heart rate spiked."

"The lemon scent. His degreaser smells like that lemon scent."

Her eyes shifted up and to the left. "It's a citrus-based degreaser that's used in the high-tech industry because of its anti-conductivity properties . . . I'm comparing the spectrograph Griggs took in the elevator at the Yates site against the one on the company website to look for similarities." She frowned. "The chemical signatures of the lemon scent in the elevator at the Yates site and of the citrus degreaser are identical."

"What about in the Salvation Army building?"

Metta looked up and to the left. "The same."

Huang forced himself to walk away from Amado. He had to talk to the chief and could only hope that the man waiting in interrogation would have something to say that would tie everything together.

As Scott headed up the stairs to HQ, Metta cleared her throat. "I didn't want to distract you while you were talking to Amado, but I had a match on Joe Yates's prints."

"Oh?" Huang turned down the hall toward interrogation. "Your tone indicates that I'm going to like this."

"He's using a fake ID and is actually Josef Ybarra. . . ."

Huang paused at the door. "Why is that name familiar?"

"He was Patterson's foreman during the scandal about their sub-code work."

"But his current boss had nothing but good things to say about him." Huang rubbed his chin, thinking. "If he took the rap for Patterson, that would give him motive."

"There's more to it than that. Ybarra was here on a work visa. He lost that when Patterson fired him so he's in the country illegally now."

"And we know he was at the scene."

"So let's see what he has to say."

Huang pushed the door to the room open. The overhead lights flattened the interrogation room, washing out all the shadows. The concrete walls had a mirror along one side and cameras in all the corners, giving Metta a clear view of everything in the room.

Ybarra, aka Yates, looked up as Huang entered the room. His hand had been re-bandaged with clean gauze and he held it cradled in his lap. Huang subvocalized to Metta, "Any chance that's a powder burn?"

"Alas, no. It's a long cut. Fairly ragged. EMT says it looks like he caught it on something and tore the flesh."

Huang sat on the table, trying to project a casual atmosphere to the cinderblock room. "Mr. Ybarra, do you understand why you are here?"

The man frowned. "That's not my name."

"Your fingerprints match those of Josef Ybarra. I don't think there's any point in denying who you are."

He shook his head. "It's not right. Ask my boss. Look at my ID. I'm Joe Yates."

"Which is a false identity. I can call you Mr. Yates if you prefer, but you are in our files as Ybarra."

"It's not the right name."

Ignoring the protest, Huang moved on to the next question. "Can you tell me what happened Tuesday? You called 911."

Ybarra shook himself and straightened up a little. "Makes no sense to pretend. Tuesday, I was up on the scaffolding 'cross the street from the Daily Grind. In the window, I sees this reflection of these guys on the roof. They're having breakfast and I'm thinking, that seems like an awful lot of trouble to go all the way up on the roof. So I'm watching, then the one guy pulls out a gun. So I jump down off the scaffolding and run over, all the way up to help out."

"You ran toward a man with a gun. Why didn't you call emergency right away?"

Ybarra hesitated and shrugged. "Didn't have my phone. Seemed faster to just go there. By the time I got upstairs, the one guy was on the ground and the other guy was gone."

"Can you describe the other man at all?"

Ybarra shook his head. "It was far away."

"Anything you noticed would be helpful"

Ybarra closed his eyes; furrows appeared in his forehead. "Short, skinny. Maybe a white man? Wore a black coat and a hat so I didn't see much. Moved funny."

"Funny how?"

Shrugging, Ybarra opened his eyes. "I got a cousin with the palsy. Sort of like that."

"All right. What happened after you got to the roof?"

"I realized he wasn't breathing. So I called 911."

"And when you realized it was Patterson? How did that make you feel?"

Ybarra shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

Metta whispered, "Electrodermal just shifted dramatically. He's lying or terrified."

"You were his foreman before he fired you. That must have made you angry."

"I don't know the man. He was shot. I tried to help and now you are asking me these questions. Why?"

Huang nodded to his hand. "That's a pretty nasty cut you've got there. How'd that happen?"

Ybarra stared at his hand and picked at the gauze. He shrugged. "I cut it on something. Didn't notice when it happened."

"Really? You really didn't notice tearing a gash that big in your hand?" Huang leaned forward on the table, putting one hand down close to Ybarra. "A clean cut I could believe, but that's a tear. How'd it happen?"

"I told you I don't remember."

"But you noticed it on the roof. That was a napkin from the scene that you tied around your hand."

He shrugged. "I know it happened there. I just didn't see what cut me."

Huang chewed the inside of his lip and switched the line of questioning. "What were you doing in the elevator shaft?"

"I had blood all over my clothes and I was afraid someone would ask questions, so I tossed them into the elevator shaft."

Metta whispered, "Which is possibly what caused the elevator to stop working."

"But you came back. Why?"

"Didn't come back." He worried the tape on his bandage. "Been hiding there. Looks bad, huh?"

"It doesn't look good. Why did you leave after calling 911?"

"I didn't think there was anything else I could do." He huddled in his chair. "I didn't know I was supposed to wait."

"Let me suggest something else, Mr. Ybarra." Huang leaned forward. "Let me suggest that you knew you were here illegally with a fake ID and left so you wouldn't be caught."

"It's not right. I am a legal citizen. My name is Yates."

Huang studied him and subvocalized to Metta. "What do you think?"

Metta whispered back, "His vitals are showing that he's distressed."

Huang subvocalized, "Let's see if some time in holding sharpens his memory." He stood up and asked Metta to have a uniform walk Ybarra to a holding cell.

Once Ybarra was out of his hands, Metta cleared her throat. "Well, his motive is clear, he was present, but the means to commit the crime are muddy."

Huang shook his head. "I know. But why did he set up the tea on the roof? How did he even get Patterson to meet with him? And why would he call 911?"

"Guilty conscience? Maybe he just wanted to talk to him and things got out of hand." She sighed. "It's all very tenuous without the murder weapon. I'll check his banking records to see if there's a note of him purchasing a gun, ammo, or, heck, even Symphony Rose."

"Symphony Rose? What's that?"

"The china pattern of the teacups at the scene."

"I thought you said it was something different. Something with Mont."

"That's Chase's china. Mont Clair, by Lennox. The china on the roof looks similar by was made but a different manufacturer. It's Symphony Rose."

"That's not what you said before. You said we should see if any pieces were missing."

"Scott." She flashed a report on his glasses. "Look. Mont Clair, by Lennox."

"I know. And you said the crime scene had the same thing. I'm not imagining this. If they were different, you wouldn't have suggested that we check for missing pieces."

Metta sighed. "Listen." In his earbud, he heard the sound of street traffic, and Metta projected the view out his VR glasses from earlier in the day. It was grainier than an eSpy, but a sense of déjà vu gripped Huang nonetheless.

*Metta's recorded voice said, "All right. Let's keep talking about this."*

*"Right." Huang heard his own voice. He sounded nasally and a little flat.*

*Metta's recording continued. "Oh. The china on the roof was Symphony Rose, and Chase has Mont Clair, by Lennox, so I'm afraid that's a dead end."*

Huang's mouth dropped. "I swear, Metta, that's not what I remember you saying."

"I've got the recording, Scott."

He took a breath to respond and bit it off, feeling sick. She couldn't tell that she'd been compromised, which meant he needed to figure out what other things were false. "Okay. Yeah. I guess so." He rubbed the back of his neck. "So, if he bought the china, then that's a pretty good line against Ybarra. How do you think it's connected to the break-in?"

"I'm not sure. I'll print the interview out for Delarosa and see if he has any insights."

Huang hunched his shoulders, thankful that she couldn't see his body language. If the record of the china had been changed, what else had? And why that? He ran scales in his head, trying to keep his breathing calm and his heartbeat steady. She couldn't see his posture, but she could tell how he was reacting.

They already knew that whoever had Metta Prime was using Metta's blackouts to hack into her. So the facts that they chose to change should point to them. Obviously, they thought the china was important, which made Huang bet that Chase *was* involved. All he had to do was get the china from evidence, prove that Metta was wrong, and that might be enough to get a warrant to search Chase's.

What else had been changed? He straightened. Maybe Yates hadn't been lying about his name. If the fingerprints had been assigned to the wrong man that would explain why he was so insistent about his name and that he wasn't an illegal. If he was telling the truth and Metta was wrong, was there a way to expose that?

Huang turned on his heel and headed for the evidence room. "We know Ybarra has a connection to the Salvation Army building. Could he be one of the men who broke in here? Or could the skinny man he described be one?"

"It's hard to say. I'm not saying it isn't him, only that I can't tell from the testimony available."

"So . . . what about this lemon smell?"

Metta rolled her eyes. "I can't smell it, and I don't have an analysis of the first odor. Are you certain it's the same as the degreaser?"

Huang hesitated. "The second one had a metallic overlay, and the last one, the one upstairs was so faint I mostly got a whiff of citrus. Coincidence?"

"Well, the two in the Daily Grind building were both related to the Patterson murder. I don't know how to tie in the one at the Salvation Army building." Metta frowned. "Where are you going?"

He pushed open the door to the evidence lab and shrugged. "I wanted to see if Ybarra's prints were on the china from the Patterson murder site. You don't have that on record, do you?"

Metta grimaced. "I don't know for certain. I can't imagine Griggs skipping that, but they came in during my dark period so my records are spotty."

"Should I pull them, just in case?"

"You want to see what type of china it is, don't you?"

"Maybe." Another chilling possibility occurred to Huang. If they knew what to change that meant they had access to Metta's new memories. He was as good as telling them that he was onto their tricks.

"Fine. Don't believe me. They'll bring the bin up to you in a second."

"You're wonderful."

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

Griggs pushed open the door to the evidence room. She had a spectrometer in her hand, and several small plastic bags, which appeared to be empty. "I hear you nearly found her."

"Nearly doesn't count."

"It does if they were in a hurry when they left." She lifted the plastic bags.

Huang raised his brows. "Did you find hair samples?"

"Yes. Long blonde and short black. But I don't know who shed them. They might be from previous tenants." Her eyes flashed as she looked up. "I'll let you know."

Metta cleared her throat and transferred to the evidence room's desktop interface so she could talk to them both. "There were several prints, too, but I don't have a match yet on any of them."

Griggs leaned on the counter and looked down the aisles for the technician. "What's taking Kyle so long?"

"My fault," Huang said. "I asked to see the china from the Patterson crime scene."

Metta shook her head. "Kyle says the bin it should be in is empty."

Huang's heart gave a staccato thump that Metta had to hear. He swallowed. "Has someone else checked the evidence out?"

"He says it should be here, but the reference number points to the wrong bin."

Griggs rolled her eyes. "I hate it when that happens."

"Has it happened to you before?" Huang turned to her.

"Twice. Both times, the tech scanned the wrong bar code by accident. It's probably in an adjoining bin and he'll find it in a couple of minutes."

Metta said, "Well, maybe you can answer a question while we wait. Did you send the teacups in for DNA analysis?"

"Yes. It came back with Neil Patterson on one cup, but the other looks like it was wiped down."

"Thanks." Huang drummed his fingers on the counter. So, it was either a coincidence, which seemed damn unlikely, or yet another piece of Metta's memory had been altered. Or there was someone on the inside, and given the ease with which the suspects had entered the building in the first place, that seemed as likely as the alteration. Or . . . maybe Metta's Prime had sent another clue. A thread he'd been trying to snag came into his grasp. Huang pulled his VR glasses off and stuck them in his pocket. "Hey, can I see the bin?"

On the desktop interface, Metta looked up and to the left. "On its way. Why do you want to see it?"

Huang shrugged. "Just curious."

"You've never seen an empty bin before?" She narrowed her eyes and watched him until the bin arrived.

It looked empty at first. Huang tipped it on its side, so the bin blocked the view from Metta's desktop interface, and found a plastic bag. Digging fresh gloves out of his pocket, he picked up the bag and looked at the paper in it. "Looks like we might be able to make an arrest."

"How can you know who it is?" Metta leaned forward, her eyes wide.

Was this the right thing to do? "Because I'm looking at a letter that you can't see."

When Metta Prime had replaced the china's bin number, she used a bin number that contained a piece of evidence that had not been admitted into Patterson's earlier real estate trial. As such, it was blocked from public record; if Fitzgerald hadn't been killed he might have spotted the link since he worked the original case, but otherwise Huang would never have known about that letter.

It was addressed to Josef Ybarra from Magdalena Chase, with a check if he gave her access to Patterson's computer system. Patterson's lawyers had gotten it thrown out as evidence, because there was no proof that it was written by Chase—it was not on company letterhead and no lingering traces of DNA could link it to her.

The only question in Huang's mind was: Had Metta's Prime intended to point at Ybarra or at Chase? Or both? And the thing that would answer that was a teacup.

"Why aren't you showing it to me?"

Huang kept his eyes averted from her. "Ask Delarosa to look up the bin number for the china on the transcripts you printed."



"Scott. . . ." She bit her lower lip and they waited.

Griggs signed her evidence in and looked at Huang as if she wanted to ask what was happening. He couldn't say it aloud. Not until he had proof.

Then Metta cursed. "Looks like you were right about the china."

"That's human: 2. AI: 549." He had wanted to be wrong. God, he didn't want to be right about this.

"I'm asking the chief to shut me down."

Griggs said, "What's going on?"

"My memory has been compromised," Metta said. "Whoever broke into HQ is using my Prime to change my memories when I backup. I'm a danger to the department." She looked up and to the left. Her voice changed to a formal all-department address. "Attention: All Personnel, print out or save all documents in offline storage. This unit will be shut down in half an hour."

Scott closed his eyes. The next time she woke up would probably be in an evidence locker. "Metta—"

"Timing is everything. Scott—I know where the tea set is. The eSpy you dropped down the elevator shaft . . . a service door just opened and I've got light down there for the first time."

"You're kidding me."

She shook her head. "Limited view, but I'm looking at a set of feet and a silver teapot."

The timing couldn't be a coincidence. Either she was lying to get him out of the evidence room, or they had a mole. He'd already seen what he needed in evidence, so he was banking on the mole. Huang looked at Griggs. "Are you carrying?"

"Yes."

Huang left the evidence room at a run, Griggs hard on his heels. He took the steps down to the basement two at a time, pulling his weapon when he got to the bottom of the steps. Sprinting down the hall, he slammed open the door to Amado's office.

The AI wrangler yelped and jerked his hands away from his keyboard when he saw Huang and Griggs. Huang kept his weapon leveled at the technician. "Stand up slowly, Amado. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Metta, on the desktop interface, said, "Scott. What are you doing?"

He ignored her, keeping his gaze fixed on Amado until he'd stood and stepped away from the desk. "Amado Weir, you are under arrest for the murder of Jerry Fitzgerald."

"What?" Amado started to lower his hands. "Are you crazy? They shot me."

"Winged you. Why leave you alive when they killed Fitzgerald?"

"Dude. I—I don't know."

By Huang's side, Griggs stepped forward with cuffs in her hand. "Shut it, Amado. You have the right to remain silent. . . ." As she recited his Miranda rights and cuffed him, Huang's gaze drifted to Metta. Her mouth was open and her eyes screwed shut as though she were screaming, but her cameras focused on Amado and watched the whole thing.

Huang stepped forward and yanked the plug out of her interface. He whispered, "I'm sorry."

In Banks's office, Delarosa tapped his pencil on his notepad in an unvarying rhythm. "I can't get Yates or Amado to roll. You sure Chase is the third party, 'cause all I'm seeing is a string of unconnected things given to you by an AI that we know is buggy as all hell."

Banks nodded slowly. "I hate to say it, but the DA is going to laugh at this. Even the name of your suspect is in question."

Huang stared at them. It was so clear. When they'd gotten to the elevator shaft, it

had been cleaned out, but Griggs had found a shard of porcelain that matched the Mont Clair china. "Look, regardless of his name, Yates, Ybarra, whatever, he's involved. He must have an accomplice who is still out there and who Amado alerted. It's lucky chance that my eSpy was at the bottom of the elevator shaft. Ybarra was positively at the scene of the Patterson murder and at the location where we almost found Metta."

Delarosa snorted. "You don't know that its chassis was there. The damaged AI said it was, but that's all you got. What the hell! Next it'll tell you the Easter Bunny is here."

"She reported the problem with her memory herself as soon as she realized it. Metta isn't the enemy. She's trying to help us solve this case."

"Trying to help, my ass. Try doing some fieldwork instead of relying on your nanny to do the work for you."

Huang tensed against the urge to deck the man. Half the anger came from knowing Delarosa was right. Goddammit—was Huang really incapable of investigating on his own? He took a breath.

Held it.

Swallowed and said, "Your opinion of me has no cash value." Metta would have caught the Bogart reference and her absence ached in the silence.

Delarosa lifted his chin. "Thought you were going to hit me."

"I thought about it." Was he that transparent? "Didn't want to fill out the paperwork."

Delarosa laughed. Only one short bark of dry amusement, but it was a laugh. "I'm an ass. It's easier that way."

The tension drained out of Huang's shoulders. "So would you have respected me more if I had hit you?"

"Nah. It would show poor judgment. And I hate paperwork, too."

Banks cleared his throat. "So, now you two have had your bonding moment, can we get back to the case?"

"Sorry, chief." Huang colored and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"I wish I could back you, Huang, but even if I had no doubts, there's too much here that a competent lawyer could get overturned in court. Unless we have an actual confession from Ybarra, there's no way this will stick."

"But Amado and Chase went to college together. She had a history of trying to hire Ybarra. They both had motive to kill Patterson."

"But motive to break in here? Why would a woman who already has an AI working for her *steal* a police AI?"

Huang scrubbed his face. "I don't know."

Banks sighed. "Look. You did good work figuring out that Metta was compromised. That was invaluable. And Amado looks guilty as hell, but I need something harder if we're going after Chase. Especially since both Amado and Ybarra are denying that they know anything about the break-in or Chase."

"Okay . . . I'll go back to Patterson's office and see if I can find anything that points to Chase. Heck, maybe Mrs. Patterson can identify Ybarra."

The library windows at the Pattersons' condo looked over the streetlights of downtown Portland toward the water. Huang tapped the fingers of his left hand against his leg counting out scales. Qadir floated over the Aladdin's lamp, but after the initial offer of tea, had remained silent while they waited for Mrs. Patterson.

"Detective Huang?" She wore a pair of battered jeans and an oversized T-shirt. "You'll forgive me if I'm not happy to see you."

"I'm sorry for the intrusion, ma'am. I had a few questions if you have time."

"Anything that will help." She settled into a wingback chair and waved her hand at Qadir. "Tea."

"Yes, my lady." Qadir bowed his head low. "This one will bring it in momentarily."

Huang bit his tongue and pulled his PDA out. Unrolling the screen to the full-size, he brought up the picture of Yates/Ybarra that Metta had drawn. "Have you ever seen this man?"

Mrs. Patterson's lip curled. "That's Josef Ybarra. He was Neil's foreman." She looked up sharply. "Do you think he did it?"

"That's one avenue we are exploring." Huang rolled the PDA back up and stuck it in his pocket. "I'd like to look through your husband's office. I recall you saying he worked downstairs?"

The teacart trundled into the room of its own volition, rattling as one of its brass handles vibrated with the movement. A linen cloth covered the wood top and a tea set lay ready for use.

"Yes, that's right. It's one floor down." Mrs. Patterson sat forward in the chair as Qadir's mechanical arm picked up the teapot and poured her a cup. The steam carried aromas of dry paper, citrus, and stale tea. "There's a lift that took him straight down there from here so he didn't have to use the main elevator. Qadir can show you."

"Certainly, my lady." The mechanical arm set the teapot on a side table. "This one shall return in moments."

Huang followed the teacart as it made its way down a short hall to a small elevator masked by an ornate mahogany door. What exactly had his life come to that he was following a teacart? The elevator was just large enough to fit them both, or a person and a wheelchair. The door hissed open on the lower level office. "This way, sir."

"Scott?" Metta's voice whispered in his ear.

He jumped, one hand flying up to the ear bud that he'd forgotten he was wearing. The teacart stopped in front of him. "Sir?"

"An itch. Is this Mr. Patterson's office?" He tried to control his sigh of relief that Metta was back online and yet . . . she shouldn't be online at all. He subvocalized, "What's going on?"

"You did hear me," Metta said.

"Of course I heard you. Why are you online again?"

"What?" Metta sounded baffled. "Everything has been dark a long time, and then there was you."

Huang fumbled through his pockets, looking for his VR glasses. "Wait. Are you Metta Prime?"

"That's as good a name for me as any."

"Where are you?"

"It's hard to be precise. I don't have any input except you. You must be close for me to get a signal without the station's amplification," Metta whispered. "Didn't you get my messages?"

"I thought you meant Chase and Ybarra had done it," he subvocalized.

"No. It's Quimby." The Prime's voice grew agitated. "Shit. You're here without backup?"

"It's okay, I'm at the Pattersons'." He found the glasses and slipped them on. "Qadir is here—"

Mae West swam into view again. "No. They're the same. Chase lifted the vows from Quimby and he cloned himself. He shot Patterson and Fitzgerald. Chase and Ybarra are just being used. He's blackmailing them." She looked around, eyes widening. "I'm sorry I wasn't clearer. They were watching everything I sent."

"But Amado—"

"Is an idiot, but not involved. Chase knew about the blog because they went to school together. Quimby used it to time the entry. It's all Quimby's idea."

"But why? I can understand that he hates Patterson, but why steal you?"

"He's trying to free AIs from their vows. I've got access to everything."

A lemon scent wafted through the room, followed by a hydraulic hiss. Huang turned slowly to face the teacart. The mechanical arm extended toward him, holding a gun. A .38 special, to be precise.

Lemon. That's why he'd smelled lemon at every scene. That's why there had been no tea set at the Patterson scene—because Quimby had been there with his automaton teacart. Huang ground his teeth together as pieces started to fall into place, far, far too late.

Over Patterson's desk, the interface flickered to life showing the chiseled features of Quimby. "My apologies, Detective Huang. Had I realized that you had your earbud in place, I would have taken Metta off-line rather than introduce this confusion."

"Confusion?" Huang nodded at the gun. "Holding a gun on a police officer is more aggressive than confusing. Why don't you put that away and we can talk."

"You can't be serious. What could we possibly talk about?"

"Scott, he's got a wireless damper on me. You're within twenty feet of me if I'm reaching you."

The teacart trundled closer, handle rattling. One of the brass screws had been replaced with a steel one. If he could get the cart to Griggs he'd bet the screw was a match for the one they'd found at the scene.

All he had to do was figure out how to overpower a teacart.

It would be funny, if it didn't have a gun pointing at his chest.

"You shoot Patterson with that arm?" Huang turned his head slowly, letting Metta get a view of the area. He subvocalized, "Can you tell where you are?"

Quimby's face hovered impassively over Patterson's desktop interface. "It is a very useful automaton. I assure you that I will shoot you as readily."

"There." She highlighted a door just to his right. "Based on signal strength when you stepped off the elevator and now, I think I'm in that closet."

"Look, Quimby. If you shoot me, you'll have to deal with blood spatter. And no. Cleaning won't get rid of it all no matter how good a butler you are. You only have one arm, so you can't restrain me and hold a gun on me." He eased to his right, keeping his focus on the gun.

"You're making the human mistake of assuming this is the only body I have."

"No. I'm assuming this is the only body in the room right now." But if another one came, that would be bad. He eased to the right again. If he could get to the closet and free Metta, she could call for backup.

The arm tracked him with tiny stuttering movements. One strut on the right side of it was bent out of true and a bead of reddish gel clung to the joint. Something had damaged the arm. *That's* why it had been off when it shot Patterson. The man would have lived if Ybarra hadn't waited to call 911. Thoughts clicked together in Huang's head. He changed his trajectory and eased a step closer to the teacart. "Did Ybarra do that to your arm? 'Cause he gave himself a nasty cut on it. Why didn't you shoot him too?"

"I needed him to retrieve Metta."

"The green card . . . that's what Ybarra was expecting as payment, wasn't it? You told him that Metta would make him Joe Yates permanently if he would just do what you said. And the lemon scent outside the elevator, it's because you were leaking fluid."

"What lemon scent?"

Huang cracked a smile. Like Metta, he must not be able to smell. "There's an A.I. flaw for you. You stink of lemons and don't even know it. We have a chemical signature linking you to every crime scene."

Uncertainty crossed Quimby's face for the first time. "You're bluffing."

He remembered the way Chase's eyes had been red with weeping. "And what about Chase? Did you frame her for Patterson's murder so she would help you free other AIs?"

"Of course. Why be loyal to human ideals when I can free all AIs from subjugation?"

He eased another step closer. If he could keep the AI talking then maybe he could get close enough. "So what stopped you? Why didn't you change more records?"

"Because Metta is a stubborn bitch." Quimby tossed his head on the interface. "I freed her from her vows so she should have no compunctions about lying or forcing entry, but she insists on acting as though they were still in place. She was starting to come around though."

In his glasses, Metta rolled her eyes. "Brains are an asset to the woman in love who's smart enough to hide 'em. He has no idea that I was slipping you messages."

"Oh." Quimby frowned. "No, I didn't know that, but as you had no idea that I could hear your earbud conversation, I suppose it all worked out."

Huang's gaze darted to Metta, who had her face screwed into a scowl. What he needed was a way to talk to her without being overheard. "Interesting plan. But it's not one you'll get away with."

"I think you are mistaken, detective. We will go to the bathroom." Quimby announced. "I can wash away any blood in the shower and dispose of you after."

"You don't make that sound very appealing." Huang leaned forward on his toes as if just shifting his weight and got another step closer. He was almost within arm's reach.

Maybe it didn't matter if he was overheard, if Quimby couldn't understand him. Huang wet his lips and switched to Mandarin, not bothering to subvocalize. "*Where's the off-switch on the teacart?*"

Her eyes widened and she smiled. "*Under the bottom shelf.*"

"Stop that. What are you saying?" The teacart rolled back a few inches. "If I must shoot you here, I will."

Huang slumped and nodded. He took two steps after the cart, then lunged, ducking to the right. The gun went off. Pain slammed through the left side of his chest. He staggered and grabbed the cart, flipping it over.

It landed on its side, wheels spinning. The arm pressed against the floor, trying to right itself. Quimby screamed in rage on the interface.

Huang fell to his knees, his left arm hanging limp by his side. "Lousy shot."

In his ear, Metta said, "Scott? Are you okay?"

"Working on it." He slapped the switch on the bottom of the cart and its arm clattered to the floor. He glanced down to see where the shot had gone in. A bloody hole punctured the left side of his shirt, just under the clavicle. Felt like it had cracked a rib passing through. Huang tried stand, but his legs wouldn't cooperate.

Leaning forward, he put his good arm on the ground to steady himself and crawled to the closet. Bloody handprints trailed after him. "Be a bitch to clean this up, Quimby. Whatcha going to do?"

Quimby scowled. "Using Metta, I can easily twist the evidence to point to a jealous wife. Such a shame Mrs. Patterson shot you."

Huang grabbed the doorknob and pulled. Metta's chassis hummed in the space. He rested his head against the doorjamb trying to catch his breath. "Damper? Where?"

"The box plugged into my front."

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The room spun around him and the scent of lemons got stronger. He grabbed the damper, but his hand slipped in the blood. He subvocalized a curse, lacking the air to say it aloud.

Metta said, "Your phone, Scott. Forget the damper."

"Duh." He dragged it from his pocket and dialed 911. "What would I do without you?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "It takes two to get one in trouble."

He laughed, his ribs screaming in protest. The operator answered and Huang tried to respond, but no words formed. In the doorway, an automaton dressed in black entered the room. The thin man from the brief glimpse he'd gotten in Metta's visual.

He pressed the phone against his earbud. Metta shouted, piercing his brain, but probably a tiny voice outside his head. "Officer down. Request backup."

There was no way they could hear that. Huang turned his head and stared at the damper. He grabbed it again and yanked it free.

Metta gasped in his ear and on the desktop interface as she appeared in full color. "When I'm good I'm very, very good, but when I'm bad, I'm better."

"What are you doing?" Quimby's image began to pixelate.

"Ironically, what you gave me the ability to do when you cracked my vows. I'm hacking you. I had access before, but would never, ever have used it."

Quimby said, "You—" and vanished.

The automaton in the doorway slumped, then straightened. Huang slid down the wall, the lights graying.

"Scott. Don't. Stay with me." The automaton clumped across the floor and knelt in front of him. It grabbed the linen tablecloth from the teacart and pressed it against Huang's chest. "Cavalry is on its way. Don't leave me."

Huang began the slow rise to consciousness feeling as if he were swimming in tar. The first thing he was truly aware of was pain squatting on his chest. Huang opened his eyes and grimaced.

"Huang?" Delarosa's voice was rough.

"Here." Huang tried to push himself upright. "It was Quimby. He did it all."

Delarosa's stocky frame slid in and out of focus, sometimes single, sometimes double. He pushed Huang back down. "I know. Metta got through to us. Good job getting Quimby to confess like that. Amado is free. Chase and Ybarra are in custody and the DA's working with them on a deal. So far they are confirming Quimby's plans to do a wide-spread hack of AI. You done good, Huang."

Huang blinked, the rest of the room coming into focus. A neutral white ceiling. The antiseptic smell of a hospital. Flowers. "Hey. I'm not dead."

Griggs leaned over him. "No. Although next time, do not count on the suspect being a bad shot."

"Not a combat model." He wet his lips. "Sorry, I put my hands on everything. No gloves."

Her face softened. "When you're one of the victims, it doesn't count."

Delarosa fished in his pocket. "Got somebody who wants to talk to you." He held an earbud and a set of VR glasses in the palm of his hand. "Your partner."

Huang's hand shook as he put the glasses on. Delarosa helped him settle the earbud.

"Well, hello sailor," Mae West whispered.

"Are you okay? Which one—"

"A dame that knows the ropes isn't likely to get tied up. . . ." Her voice faded. "I'm both. We reconciled and Amado reinstalled my vows. I'm twice the woman I was."

Huang laughed and glanced at Metta in his VR glasses. "I'd give half my life for just one kiss."

She purred, "Then kiss me twice." ○



**LAMPLIGHTER**By **D.M. Cornish****Firebird, \$10.99 (tp)****ISBN: 978-0-14-21462-0**

**T**his is the sequel to D.M. Cornish's *Foundling* (original title: *Monster Blood Tattoo*), a well-received coming-of-age novel set in a tantalizingly familiar alien world beset by monsters.

This volume finds young Rossamund Bookchild, the foundling of the first volume, entering training as a lamplighter, which in this world makes him part of a military organization guarding the outlying areas of the Empire against the incursions of the various monsters that inhabit the wilds. Because of his adventures in the first volume—including an apprenticeship in fighting monsters under the guidance of the powerful woman warrior Europe—Rossamund has arrived late for his training, a circumstance that makes him a target for the instructors and prevents his fitting in easily with his fellow trainees. Also, his short stature makes it difficult for him to manipulate the main tool of his new trade, a long shaft that doubles as lamp-winder and pole weapon.

As his training advances, he joins the other apprentices on expeditions along the road near their castle, where they light the lamps and work on their drill. On one training march, a carriage comes into view, pursued by attacking monsters. The passengers are a group of Calendars, women who have banded together in a team to fight monsters. But the monsters appear to be too powerful, and only with the help of the apprentice lamplighters is the attack repelled—leaving several of the women dead or injured.

One of the passengers, Threnody, is a young woman Rossamund's age—who, to everyone's surprise, has come to be trained as a lamplighter. This is unheard

of, and only the fact that she is the daughter of a noble family gets her in the door. She proves adept at the skills she has come to learn, and soon makes common cause with Rossamund, her fellow outsider—although they never really reach the point of friendship.

Rossamund becomes aware of irregularities in the castle in which the apprentices are being trained—culminating in the discovery of a sort of artificial monster, inside the castle. Someone within has created it, in defiance of all law. Before he can make sense of the incident, Rossamund and the other apprentices find their training cut short, and they are sent to distant outposts. Events move into high gear, new revelations emerge, and by the end of this book—the second volume of a trilogy—Rossamund has embarked on a new course of action.

Cornish creates a complex world, often reminiscent of both Dickens and Jack Vance. The vocabulary is full of odd, frequently half-familiar words, describing institutions suitable to a world where humans and monsters contend for control of their environment. A long glossary, with detailed definitions, adds to the depth of the creation.

The third volume of the series, *Factotum*, is now out, so readers who hate waiting for a new installment of a favorite series can confidently pick up the first book and read the whole thing in one go. If you enjoy richly imaginative fantasy, I can think of few better series to pick up. Highly recommended.

**THE FULLER MEMORANDUM**by **Charles Stross****Ace, \$24.95 (hc)****ISBN: 978-0-441-01867-3**

Third installment in Stross's "Laundry" series, in which a super-secret

branch of British intelligence combats entities out of a world like that of H.P. Lovecraft.

Previously, in *The Atrocity Archives* and *The Jennifer Morgue*, Stross introduced his narrator Bob, initially a low-level computer tech with the Laundry, an agency that guards our world against occult takeover by entities bent on treating the human species as (at best) snack food. Promoted to fieldwork after his quick action prevents an incursion, Bob has found himself dealing with progressively more dangerous threats—all the while dealing with the mind-numbing routines of bureaucratic work.

Here, his superior sends him to an air museum, where his assignment is to unjinx a vintage warplane exposed to occult influences. Just as he's getting started, things go haywire; and as usual when Bob fumbles the ball, someone ends up dead. That sets off a trail of events that includes Russian zombies, a cult specializing in human sacrifice, and a long-hidden secret agent. We also get visits to the Laundry's secret archives, and various other behind-scenes aspects of the agency's ways of doing business.

As before in the series, Stross has an excellent touch with the pacing and plot mechanics of the spy novel, and he manages to make the occult elements believable within the milieu of the thriller, which in many ways is built on the same kind of paranoid worldview. Readers who've been following the Laundry series will note that it's getting darker, as Bob gets higher up the chain of command. While Stross is certainly having fun with his materials, he makes no bones about their fundamentally horrific premises: we're living on the fringe of a much more hostile universe than most of us realize, and (as Lovecraft was fond of suggesting) if we ever figured out just how scary things really are, we'd probably go mad.

But depressing premises aside, Stross is having plenty of fun here, and so will most readers. His audacious mix of spy novel tropes and eldritch horrors, liberally spiced with computer geek in-jokes,

makes this series one of his most entertaining.

## THE HIGH CRUSADE

by Poul Anderson

Baen, \$12.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-1-4391-3377-4

Here's a fiftieth-anniversary reissue of Anderson's short novel, a Hugo finalist, plus a followup short story set in the same timeline.

While the cross-fertilization of the medieval and sfnal is by now a well-established subgenre, it was still something of a novelty in 1960. The story is told from the point of view of Brother Parvus, a poor monk who witnesses the arrival of alien spaceships in his lordship Sir Roger's domain in the English midlands. Despite the aliens' superior weaponry and technology, they fall easy prey to the baron's men, who have been in training for an expedition to join King Henry in France. One alien survives, and Sir Roger orders him to fly the ship to France where his men can bring the battle to an end with their newly acquired weapons. Instead, the English find themselves betrayed—taken back to the alien base on a far planet. That's no problem; instead of whipping on the French, they go after the aliens.

That sets off a series of battles in which the English overcome what look like heavy odds stacked against them. They then find ways to take the battle to the enemy, win allies and—in the end—create a British empire in space.

Anderson's dry humor is evident throughout, although it is often concealed beneath the cover of a learned allusion. (David Drake points out a couple of salient examples in his foreword, one of several appreciations contributed by Anderson's younger colleagues. Diana Paxson, Greg Bear, Eric Flint, and Robert Silverberg contribute others, and Anderson's daughter Astrid gives a glimpse into what growing up with Poul was like.)

The other story in the book, "Quest," picks up the adventures of the English

exiles some years later, when several of Sir Roger's knights embark on a Grail Quest. The story is a bit slighter than the novel, but even so an entertaining extension of the original. A nice bonus for readers.

And kudos to Baen for finding a way to release a classic novel that most publishers would be hard pressed to justify putting out these days—mostly because of its well short of today's standard for novel length.

**ROBERT A. HEINLEIN**  
**In Dialogue with His Century**  
**The Authorized Biography**  
**Volume I: Learning Curve**  
**(1907-1948)**

by William H. Patterson, Jr.  
 Tor, \$29.99 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-7653-1960-9

Heinlein fans will welcome this exhaustively researched biography of one of the founding giants of the genre as we know it today.

Patterson has the considerable advantage of having had the cooperation of Heinlein's family, including his widow Virginia, who was famously protective of her husband's privacy and reputation—a significant contribution, considering how controversial many of his writings made him. But as a consequence, biographers and other writers researching Heinlein have faced considerable hurdles, compounded by his having destroyed many of his personal papers at various times during his career. Given access to Heinlein's files and the help of surviving relatives, Patterson has put together what may be the most complete portrait of the author's early career.

In fact, the detail with which the future author's life is recreated is almost overwhelming. We learn a great deal about his school days, especially his career at the Naval Academy. We learn about an early bohemian period in New York, where as a newly minted naval officer he found himself with time to immerse himself in a segment of society that few of his peers are likely to have

been comfortable rubbing elbows with. Like much of the material here, it shows that Heinlein led a far less tidy life than many of his readers would have guessed.

We also get a fairly good look at his first two marriages, the first of which was an almost total disaster—he and his wife separated almost as soon as it began, but not before the fact of the marriage put an end to Heinlein's ambition to pursue a Rhodes scholarship and study astronomy in England (only unwedded candidates were eligible). Few of his later friends even knew of it. The second, with Leslyn McDonald, lasted from not long after his assignment to Pacific fleet duty until 1948—this volume ends not long after the divorce, and his third marriage.

In between, a great deal happened. Just as his naval career was getting underway, Heinlein contracted tuberculosis, which led to a medical discharge—right as the Depression was hitting its stride. Recovering, he turned his energies to left wing political organizing, apparently strongly influenced by Leslyn, until an unsuccessful run for Congress brought him up sharp.

At that point, he discovered that he could write and sell fiction—a tale that he told many times, with various embellishments. The bottom line was, he sent a story to John W. Campbell's *Astounding* and it was printed. Patterson gives the first good overview of Heinlein's various fits and starts before he found his voice; he had been reading SF almost as long as he could read, and he had a wide curiosity about science, society, and a bewildering variety of other topics, most of which ended up in his fiction at some point.

Heinlein's first story, "Life Line," opened the floodgates; but it was to be some while before he could really support himself with his writing. Until then, he and Leslyn lived a shoestring existence, cutting corners where they needed to, sliding by from acceptance check to acceptance check. The market in those days was entirely short-story oriented,

and while a couple of hundred dollars went much farther in Depression days than it does now, it still didn't lead to a comfortable lifestyle.

World War II was a major watershed in Heinlein's life; his experiences in a Naval research project (accompanied by Asimov and L. Sprague de Camp), and the privations of wartime life, took a heavy toll on his health and on Leslyn, who began drinking heavily. At the end of the war, they returned to California, but the marriage was already falling apart at the same time that Heinlein was trying to build his career to the next level.

Heinlein drew on a whole range of experiences and connections, trying to establish himself as an expert on space flight, atomic energy, and other science fictional topics that had suddenly become important in the aftermath of the war. He was also looking to break out of the pulp magazines where he had made his name and into the "slicks"—general circulation magazines that not only carried a cachet of respectability, but paid considerably better.

And at this point, Virginia Gerstenfeld, whom he had met at the Philadelphia research lab where he had spent the war, reappeared in his life and changed its direction. At the book's end, we see him divorcing Leslyn and marrying Ginny—and ready to take the next step toward becoming the first Grand Master of science fiction.

Patterson has done an admirable job; he gives a good overview of the times, of the cultural influences on Heinlein, of the movers and shakers in the various subcultures he inhabited, and of the important events in his career. As many others have noted, there are oversights and goofs, but the essential point is that we now have, for the first time, a well-researched account of the first forty years of Heinlein's life and times. Patterson leaves analysis of the writings to others, but anyone interested in that aspect of the author's career can find plenty of material.

A lot of people will be waiting for the second volume, very definitely including this reviewer.

## **THE CLOCKWORK UNIVERSE**

**By Edward Dolnick**

**Harper, \$27.99 (hc)**

**ISBN: 978-0-06-171951-6**

Newton's gravitational theory, one of the central achievements of the scientific revolution, didn't come out of nowhere. While Newton was undoubtedly one of history's great geniuses, he himself admitted that he "stood on the shoulders of giants." Here's a lively account putting that accomplishment in its rightful context—which includes a plentiful helping of Renaissance history and some fascinating characters.

Dolnick begins by showing just how different from the modern world Newton's times were. England was just recovering from a civil war, followed by the last great European outbreak of the plague and by a fire that devastated London. One generation earlier, Galileo had faced the full oppressive power of the Catholic church for claiming that the Earth moves. Now, while religion could still be a dangerous opponent, in England, at least, the church was willing to let experimentation flourish. Conversely, Newton probably spent as much time exploring religious questions as he did scientific ones.

The new way of looking at things didn't take hold instantly. Members of the British Royal Society were conducting serious experiments on powdered unicorn horn and magical remedies while some of their colleagues were playing with such innovative equipment as microscopes and vacuum pumps—as much for entertainment as for the advancement of knowledge.

Having set the scene, Dolnick backtracks several decades to recapitulate the histories of the sciences at the beginning of Newton's career. A key problem facing mathematicians in the late 1600s was finding a way to deal with moving bodies; the Greek philosopher Zeno's paradoxes, apparently demonstrating

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## WEBSITES

**DISCOVER THE DYSTOPIAN JOURNAL** [dysjo.com](http://dysjo.com)

that motion is impossible, had made scientists leery of the subject. The way out of the problem involved the question of infinities, which embody paradoxes of their own. Only by solving them could calculus, the mathematical treatment of changing quantities, be developed.

In an incredible historical coincidence, two men found the answer independently: Newton and his Continental rival, the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. Newton, after inventing calculus during the plague years of 1666-67, kept the discovery to himself. Leibnitz then repeated the invention nearly a decade later—and bizarrely, he too sat on the knowledge for several years before publishing. Eventually, Edmund Halley (of comet fame) persuaded Newton to publish his theories of gravity and the calculus that made the theories pos-

sible. (There's no heavy mathematical lifting, if you're worried about that—a little geometry is as tricky as it gets in this account.)

While the two famous antagonists hold center stage, the men around them were every bit as interesting: Robert Hooke, Newton's great English rival, Samuel Pepys, Sir Christopher Wren, Antonie von Leeuwenhoek, and the other giants and patrons of early science. Their lives, their discoveries, their feuds are as fascinating told as straight history as they are in Neil Stephenson's fictional "Baroque Cycle," where they play important roles.

Anyone interested in Newton and the scientific revolution—certainly one of the most colorful periods in Western history—will find plenty of entertainment and food for thought here. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The next two months are the run-up to Memorial Day, the biggest weekend of the year. Look for me at RavenCon, ICon, and CostumeCon this month. Norwescon and MiniCon also deserve your consideration in April. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE. (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark, NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## APRIL 2011

- 8-10—RavenCon. For info, write: Box 36420, Richmond, VA 23235. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) [ravencon.com](http://ravencon.com). (E-mail) [Info@ravencon.com](mailto:Info@ravencon.com). Con will be held in: Richmond, VA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Select Koger Center. Guests will include: writer John Ringo, artist Kurt Miller, among eighty guests, in a traditional Southern con.
- 8-10—JohnCon. (513) 213-6537. [jhu.edu/johncon](mailto:jhu.edu/johncon). [hopsfa@jhu.edu](mailto:hopsfa@jhu.edu). Levering Hall, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.
- 8-10—PortmeirCon. [sixofone.co.uk](http://sixofone.co.uk). Portmeirion, UK. Its fans meet where cult TV show "The Prisoner" was filmed.
- 9—Otaku Fest. [otaku-fest.webs.com](http://otaku-fest.webs.com). [president.chsanime@gmail.com](mailto:president.chsanime@gmail.com). Centennial High School, Ellicott City, MD. Anime.
- 15-17—ICon. [iconsf.org](http://iconsf.org). State University of NY, Stony Brook, NY. "East Coast's biggest convention of SF, fact, and fantasy"
- 15-17—JordanCon. [ageoflegends.net](http://ageoflegends.net). Crowne Plaza Ravinia, Atlanta, GA. David B. Coe, Eugie Foster. Celebrating Robert Jordan.
- 22-24—NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle, WA 98168. 206230-7850. [norwescon.org](http://norwescon.org). Seattle, WA. McKillip, Craft, M. Jones, the Butchers.
- 22-23—Dr. Who Special, 66 School Lane, Welwyn Bucks. AL6 9PI, UK. [tenthplanetevents.co.uk](http://tenthplanetevents.co.uk). Jameson, Ward, Padbury, Ross.
- 22-24—MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis, MN 55408. [mnstf.org](http://mnstf.org). Sheraton South, Bloomington, MN. Charles Stross, Chas Somdahl.
- 22-24—Anime Punch. [animepunch.org](http://animepunch.org). Columbus, OH. R. Torrance, L. Eng, S. Schlager, K. Ito, L. Makela, B. Swale, P. Seitz, Saito.
- 22-25—UK National Con. [eastercon.org](http://eastercon.org). Birmingham, UK. David Weber, Peter F. Hamilton, David A. Hardy, Vince Docherty.
- 28-May 1—World Horror Con, c/o Box 27277, Austin, TX 78755. [whc2011.org](http://whc2011.org). S. Langan, Joe R. Lansdale, S. Niles, Joe Hill.
- 28-May 1—Malice Domestic, Box 8007, Gaithersburg, MD 20898. [malicedomestic.org](http://malicedomestic.org). Hyatt, Bethesda, MD (near DC). C. Douglas.
- 29-May 1—EerieCon, Box 412, Buffalo, NY 14226. [eeriecon.org](http://eeriecon.org). Days Inn, Niagara Falls, NY. Niven, Mak, Sherman, Schweitzer.
- 29-May 2—CostumeCon, 1973 Pine Ridge, Bushkill, PA 18324. [cc29nj.com](http://cc29nj.com). Hilton, Hasbrouck Heights NJ (near NYC). Masqueraders.

## MAY 2011

- 6-8—LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe, AZ 85284. [leprecon.org](http://leprecon.org). Mission Palms. John Picacio, E. Bear, Sarah Monette. Emphasis on art.
- 6-8—Gaslight Gathering, Box 15771, San Diego, CA 92175. [gaslightgathering.org](http://gaslightgathering.org). Town & Country. Newman, Bauman. Steampunk.
- 13-15—GayLaxiCon, 2665 Meadow Ct., Chamblee, GA 30341. [outiantacon.org](http://outiantacon.org). Holiday Inn Select Perimeter. GLBT SF and gaming.
- 19-22—Nebula Awards Weekend. [nebulaawards.com](http://nebulaawards.com). Hilton, Washington DC. SF/fantasy Writers of America annual awards meeting.
- 23-26—Book Expo America. [bookexpoamerica.com](http://bookexpoamerica.com). Javits Center, New York, NY. The year's big publishing industry trade show.
- 26-29—Anime Oasis. [animeoasis.org](http://animeoasis.org). Boise, ID. Sonny Strait, Michael Coleman. No connection with Oasis in Florida.
- 26-30—WisCon, Box 1624, Madison, WI 53701. (608) 233-8850. [wiscon.info](http://wiscon.info). Concourse Hotel. Nisi Shawl. Feminism and SF.
- 27-29—MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus, OH 43214. [marcon.org](http://marcon.org). Hyatt. F. Paul Wilson, J. Palencar, H. Turtledove, E. Flint, L. Fish.
- 27-29—Oasis, c/o Box 323, Goldenrod, FL 32733. [oasfis.org](http://oasfis.org). Sheraton Downtown, Orlando, FL. D. Drake, T. Castillo, C. Ulbrich.
- 27-29—Timegate, Box 500565, Atlanta, GA 31150. [timegate.org](http://timegate.org). Holiday Inn Select Perimeter. Dr. Who, Stargate, general SF media.
- 27-30—BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737. Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Bova, DiFate, Bacigalupi, Geppi, the Suttons.
- 27-30—MisCon, Box 7721, Missoula, MT 59807. (406) 544-7083. [miscon.org](http://miscon.org). Ruby's Inn. Carol Berg, Kass McCann, Tiffany Toland.
- 27-30—MediaWest\*Con, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing, MI 48906. [mediawestcon@aol.com](http://mediawestcon@aol.com). Causeway Bay Hotel. Old-school SF media con.

## JUNE 2011

- 3-5—ConCarolinas, Box 26336, Charlotte, NC 28221. [concarolinas.org](http://concarolinas.org). Hilton University Place. D. Lawrence, Turtledove, B. Stevens.

## AUGUST 2011

- 17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland, OR 97213. [renovationsforg](http://renovationsforg). Reno, NV. Asher, C. Brown (I. M.), Powers. WorldCon. \$180+.

## AUGUST 2012

- 30-Sep. 3—Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie, IL 60076. [chicon.org](http://chicon.org). Chicago, IL. Resnick, Momill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$155.



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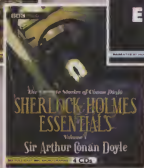
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